‘Not just a housewife’:
Gender, Class, and Labour in the New Economy of Urban India

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This dissertation is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology.

Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text

It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee.

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Abstract

This thesis presents an ethnographic study of young lower middle class women’s engagement in the new service economy in Delhi, India. Following the economic restructuring of the 1990s, the emergence of a ‘New Middle Class’ in urban India has been widely and popularly noted. The newness of this middle class, scholars have argued, is based on the emergence of ‘modern’ lifestyles, characterised by new multinational jobs, new consumption of global goods, and indeed new behaviours and attitudes. The salience of gender in the formation of this New Middle Class has been highlighted through studies of middle class women’s entry into higher education and skilled service work.

In this thesis, I explore the emergence of women’s employment as a practice of class ‘distinction’. I focus specifically on the *lower* middle classes, where gender and class relations are particularly subject to change, conflict, and contestations. In a ‘liminal’ position as neither working class nor securely middle class, young women gain entry into low-level service work in cafés, call centres, malls, and offices, rejecting the alternative trajectory of getting married and being ‘just a housewife’. Conscious of their lack of capital, they undertake skills training and mould their ‘habitus’ to mediate belonging in the new economy. However, these negotiations accrue costs over time, resulting in their movement in and out of precarious employment.

These ethnographic findings fracture the singularity of the narrative of women’s ‘aspirations’ in the new economy, instead highlighting that young lower middle class women are ambivalent about their employment. Through narrative analysis that emphasises the inseparability of relations of class and gender, the thesis contributes towards nuancing the theory of ‘distinction’, suggesting that the process of *seeking distinction* for those in liminal positions is characterised by both pleasures and injuries in the context of socio-economic change.

Acknowledgements

I have been called a 'happy PhD person' and in the few weeks before submission, I was told seven times (on last count) by various people that I do not look like I am about to submit – I can only accept the 'PhD glow' by thanking the people who have inspired me, motivated me, and kept me company through this journey.

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Through this PhD, I finally fulfilled my small-town-girl dream of living in Delhi, only a decade too late. Thank you to Sophiya, who provided me my first home in Delhi and who has worked her architect magic on the maps in this thesis; Arvind, who provided me a second home and love to keep me nourished come rain or shine; and Aditya, who provided me a workspace and drove (mostly) patiently through the Delhi traffic. In Aligarh, I could have downtime, thanks to Saadia, who is always the doctor 'on duty' for me and whose generosity means Sophiya and I can enjoy the finer things in life. Thank you also to Ramdevi, Rizwana, and Sandhya – the women who wash our dishes, keep our homes clean, make our lives comfortable, and get very little in return for it.

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Amma, who did not finish hers because I wouldn't stop crying in the creche; and Abba, who taught me to stand on my own two feet (quite literally). Their unconditional love makes me and my sisters flourish. I am as proud of having been raised by them as they are of my every little achievement.

The brilliant young women I met during fieldwork

Particularly, Chinu, who can never run out of things to talk about; Pooja, who I share love of food and feminism with; and Sunita, whose smile actually made all of this possible. My visits to Delhi would not be the same without you.

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Note on anonymity and transcriptions

Names of all the respondents, workplaces, and training centres have been anonymised. Although the respondents did not expect their families or employers to read my thesis, some of them expressed concern about my work being published in the media. Therefore, I conducted all interactions with the promise of anonymity. I have tried to choose pseudonyms in keeping with the religion and caste of the respondents. Similarly, names of specific workplaces have been anonymised. I have, however, not changed the names of places/locations. These locations are expansive enough to not reveal identities of my respondents and are important to understanding the geopolitics of the city.

The interviews were conducted largely in Hindi although some respondents used English phrases during conversations and interviews. I translated and transcribed the interviews in English (further discussed in Chapter 2), retaining all the English and some Hindi phrases in the transcripts. All original phrases are underlined and italicised in the extracts in the text.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Gender, Class, and Labour in Urban India

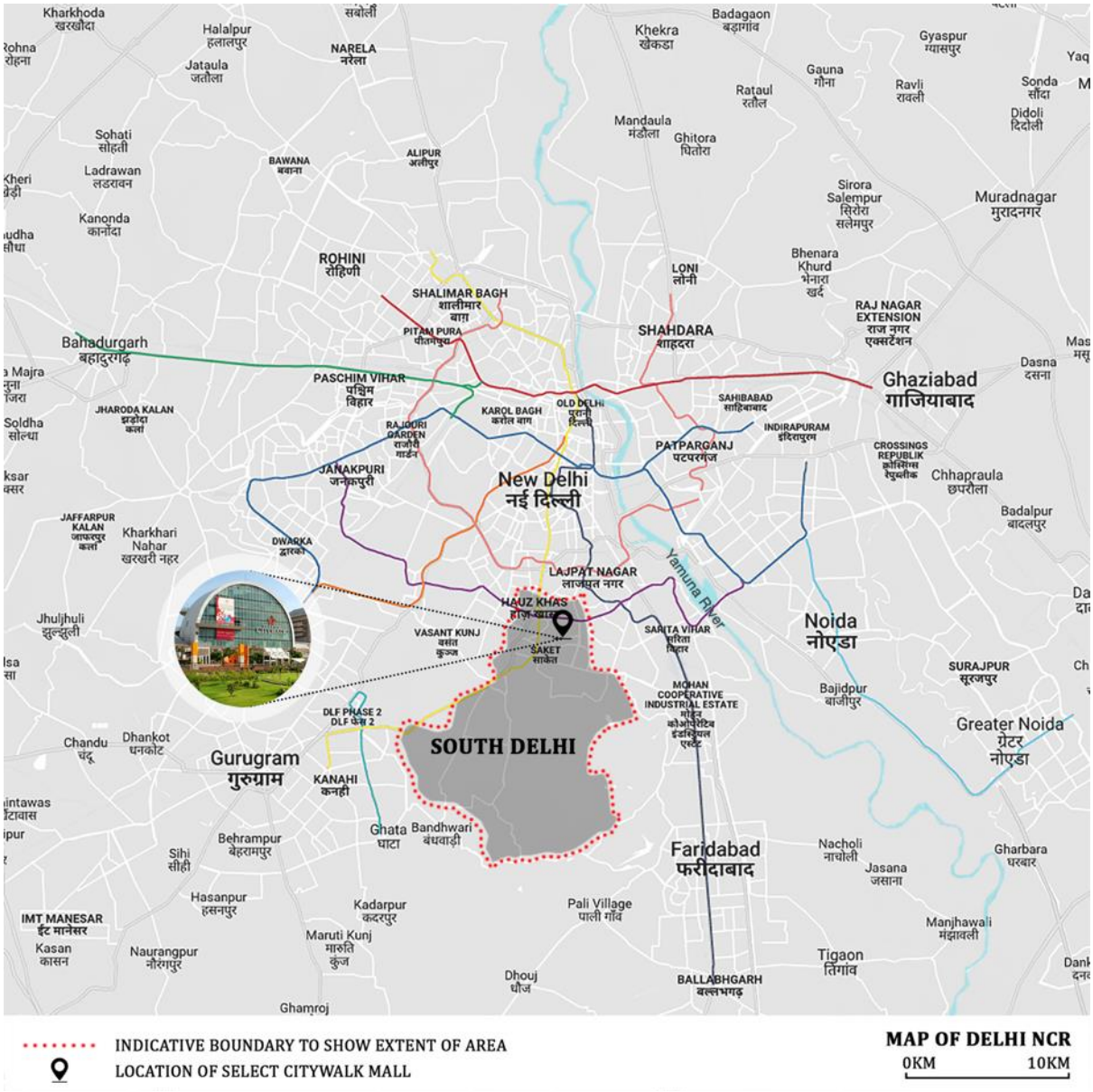

Image 1: Select Citywalk mall occupies a prominent position in South Delhi

Introduction

The Select Citywalk mall, a looming glass and concrete structure in South Delhi, is hard to miss not only because of its literal expansiveness over six acres of land but also because of the significance it has come to acquire in the recent imagination of Delhi as a 'worlding' city (Roy and Ong, 2011). With its immaculately designed and maintained outdoors, embedded with fountains, plants, a large statue of Buddha, and air-conditioned interiors, the conspicuous presence of the mall renders the surrounding urban villages and low-income neighbourhoods invisible[1]. Correspondingly, conspicuous consumption of the much discussed 'New Middle Class' renders the extensive labour that maintains the infrastructures of 'modernity' invisible. Symbolising the conflicts of globalisation, the Select Citywalk mall is an appropriate leitmotif for this research, which explores gender, class, and labour in urban India. Specifically, the thesis presents the experiences of young women workers in the 'new economy'[2], composed of new workplaces – cafés, call centres, malls, and offices – that require new kinds of work and, indeed, new kinds of workers. The thesis positions women's employment as a practice of class 'distinction' (Bourdieu, 2010 [1984]), that is, women's employment in the new economy as something to be sought to claim a stake in the emerging 'New Middle Class' (Fernandes, 2000; Ganguly-Scrase, 2003; also see Donner, 1999). Drawing attention to the 'liminal' position (Turner, 1967, 1969) of *lower* middle class women – as 'between and betwixt' working class and middle class, housewives and professionals, and necessity and aspiration – this research nuances 'distinction' as not simply inherently unachievable, as Bourdieu (2010 [1984]) postulates for the petit bourgeois, but as ambivalent, characterised by both pleasures and injuries (Reay, 1997; Lawler, 1999; Skeggs, 2004c; Dickey, 2012). As such, the thesis aims to explore practices of

[1] In 2017, towards the second half of my fieldwork, I noticed a filigree wall had come up, almost overnight, opposite the Select Citywalk mall, literally making the urban village, Khirki Extension, invisible. The families who slept (and lived) by the Khirki Extension bus stop also seemed to have disappeared. On closer inspection, I saw a small park behind the wall, marked by a board – 'Development and Maintenance of SDMC Jamun Wala Park by SELECT INFRASTRUCTURE PVT. LTD. under CSR Initiative', co-signed by 'Management, Select Citywalk' and 'SDMC' (South Delhi Municipal Council). In the remaining months of fieldwork, as I continued frequenting the mall and crossing the road to walk over to Khirki, I looked into this hidden park, and always found it empty.

[2] Although 'new economy' is an imprecise term, it is useful to capture service professions that have emerged in India in the last three decades that young women of this research were engaged in or expressed desire for. Primarily, these included cafés, call centres, shopping malls, and offices (where workers were involved in either sales calling or data entry work).

distinction by those in liminal positions in the context of rapid change through the ethnographic study of gender, class, and labour in urban India.

Following the economic restructuring of the 1990s which opened up the Indian economy to global trade, the country has experienced significant socio-economic change. The terms 'post-liberalisation' and 'post-1990' are now commonly used as shorthand to refer to the 'new' India that has rejected state-led development in favour of market efficiency[3], heralding India and young Indians at the global stage. These changes are credited with the growth of the 'New Middle Class' in India as "the social group which is able to negotiate India's new relationship with the global economy in both cultural and economic terms..." (Fernandes, 2000, p. 90). Youth[4] comprise the main actors in the New Middle Class as the 'new globalised generation' that "admires capitalism and wants to get rich…is technology savvy, consumes guiltlessly…favors jobs in the private corporate sector, and has higher literacy rates" (Lukose, 2009, p. 6). In particular, the 'newness' of the post-1990 middle class is closely linked to the expansion of the service economy and the employment opportunities it offers – "…in symbolic terms, while for the old middle class the cultural and economic standard may have been represented by a job in a state bank or Indian civil service, the new middle class would aspire to a job in a multinational corporation or foreign bank" (Fernandes, 2000, p.90). However, there is little consensus on the size, composition, or definition of the New

[3] This change is encapsulated in the widely used concept of 'neoliberalism', which signifies not only economic but ideological shift of responsibility to the individual. Rather than understanding neoliberalism as "a fixed set of attributes with predetermined outcomes", in this thesis, I adopt the anthropologist Ong's (2007, p.3) conceptualisation of small 'n' neoliberalism, that is, "a logic of governing that mitigates and is selectively taken up in diverse political contexts" (quoted in Springer, 2012, p. 136). This allows for awareness of the unevenness and contestations of 'neoliberalism' that have been highlighted by several scholars in the case of India (see, for example, Fernandes, 2000; Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase, 2009).

[4] For statistical purposes, the United Nations defines the category of 'youth' as people between the ages of 15 and 24. However, the boundaries of youth – when defined as "a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood's independence…between the ages of leaving compulsory education, and finding their first job" ('Definition of Youth (Fact Sheet)') - can vary according to context. For women, such transition may also be signalled through marriage and motherhood, an aspect that is rarely fully considered in definitions of 'youth'. India is often classified as a 'young' country, with over half of its population under the age of 25 years. The predominance of youth in India is commonly cited as a challenge for the country, particularly because of the need to generate adequate employment for this generation (for example, see *'The Youth Bulge': India Struggles to Employ an Exploding Population*, April 2019, Wall Street Journal). This thesis is primarily based on ethnography with young women between the ages of 19 and 23 (thus, technically 'youth'). Supplementary interviews with older women between the ages of 24 and 34 draw attention to similarities and variances between the two groups. Chapter 2 sets out the methodological approach of this research.

Middle Class. Aslany (2019) suggests that 28.5 per cent of the Indian population is middle class; Baviskar and Ray (2012) put the figure at 26 per cent; while Banerjee and Duflo (2008) argue that these optimistic estimates comprise more of a 'stable working class' than middle class. Further, the unevenness of 'development' is noted by many scholars, who point out the discrepancies between the discursive construction and material realities of the 'New Middle Class' in India (Fernandes, 2000; Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase, 2009).

Strikingly, contrary to expectations that the growth of services will lead to increased employment of women (a trend qualified as 'feminisation of labour', see Standing, 2011; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2014), the female labour force participation rate in India has been declining in recent years (see Abraham 2013 on 'de-feminisation' of labour in India). At only 27 per cent overall and only 16 per cent in urban areas (*Employment and Unemployment Situation in India 2011-12*, 2014), it is one of the lowest in the region of South Asia[5]. Some scholars have suggested a U-shaped relationship between family income and women's participation in work (Mammen and Paxson, 2000; Bhalla and Kaur, 2011; Das *et al.*, 2015) – that is, women withdraw from the labour market as the household income increases, eventually returning at the high end of household income. Others have contextualised low female labour force participation in the decline of agriculture, stagnation of manufacturing, and 'jobless growth' of services (Ghosh, 2009; Mazumdar and Neetha, 2011). While these studies, largely based on survey data (commonly the National Sample Survey (NSS) or the Indian Human Development Survey (IHDS)), provide insights into long-term trends, they are unable to capture *women's own negotiations of socio-economic change*. Therefore, although the intriguing statistic of declining female labour force participation rate is in the background of this research, my interest lies in exploring young women's relationship to and experiences in the new economy. As such, the thesis does not claim to resolve the conundrum of low female labour force participation rate in India. Instead, it points to the need to pay closer attention to women's position and role in the new economy, and thus, to the significance of gender in the formation of the 'New Middle Class'.

[5] The female labour force participation rate (over the age of 15) in Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan is 80 per cent, 57 per cent, 35 per cent, and 24 per cent, respectively. By way of broader comparison, the female labour force participation rate in Brazil and China, two of the BRICS countries alongside India, is 60 per cent and 64 per cent respectively (Sudarshan, 2014).

The discursive construction of the 'New Middle Class' in India is, Ganguly-Scrase (2003) suggests, closely related to desirability for "the public visibility of women and their relative freedom to pursue careers" (p. 554). This is a departure from the association of high status "with practices of spatial segregation and women's domestic roles" (Donner, 2008, p. 14). This shift in favour of women's employment is not merely symbolic; as Fernandes (2000) points out, women's employment also offers families a way to "negotiate increasing household costs and new lifestyle standards that correspond to public representations of the new middle class" (p.100). Although scholars have commonly explored changing attitudes towards women's education and employment in the new economy through the framework of 'aspiration' (see, for example, Talukdar and Linders, 2013; Vijayakumar, 2013; Brown, Scrase and Ganguly-Scrase, 2017, among others), in this thesis, I specifically understand women's employment as a practice of 'distinction'. That is, rather than interpreting the desire for women's employment only as *aspirational* – as something to be achieved – I understand women's employment as a site for formations and contestations of class and gender. In this analytic shift, I do not forego the concept of aspirations. Instead, I engage with "the act of aspiring" as a mechanism of production of "gendered class distinction" (Vijayakumar, 2013, p. 779) (also see, Walkerdine, 2003; Allen, 2014). This research builds upon the scholarship that complicates the notion of 'aspiration' by drawing attention to global/local (Brown, Scrase and Ganguly-Scrase, 2017), flexible (Vijayakumar, 2013), and stigmatised (Mathew, 2018) aspirations. Specifically, this research aims to disrupt the linearity of 'aspirations' by highlighting the ambivalence of women's employment as a practice of 'distinction' among the lower middle classes.

Adopting feminist research praxis, I privilege young women's own accounts of interactions with the 'new economy'. This implies that rather than approaching women as 'untapped capital' for economic growth or subjects of empowerment, as is common in developmentalist approaches (see, for example, *Economic Survey 2017-18*, 2018), I am interested in exploring women's narratives about their subjectivities. For the young women of this research, the question – 'Why do you work?' – was not always easy to respond to. The discomfort, vagueness, and contradictions in their responses that the thesis chapters explore signal that women's employment is not a straightforward matter. While men are workers by default, women's decisions to enter employment are subject to scrutiny by families, communities, and even employers. Of course, working

class women have historically worked alongside, and often much more than men to secure livelihoods. On the other end, upper middle and upper class women may access white collar jobs, as is confirmed by the abundant research on women in information technology in India (see, for example, Radhakrishnan, 2011; Upadhya, 2011; Belliappa, 2013). As such, anxieties around women's work emerge most strongly among the 'in-between' middle classes, where women's withdrawal from work is possible but also fraught with vulnerability. While there is growing literature on the 'New Middle Class' and gender in India (Donner, 2008; Dhawan, 2010; Radhakrishnan, 2011; Upadhya, 2011; Belliappa, 2013; Fuller and Narasimhan, 2014), it tends to focus on those who are *securely* middle class. Taking that as a point of departure, in this thesis, I focus on the 'lower middle classes'[6] who form the bulk of the New Middle Class (Desai, 2001). Inhabiting a *liminal* position between working class poor and secure middle class, the lower middle classes offer a window into the uneven processes of class formations (Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase, 2009; Dickey, 2012, 2016). Among the lower middle classes, while women's incomes may not be entirely necessary to sustaining families, they are significant in ensuring their families' tenuous hold on middle-classness (Fernandes, 2000). The symbolic and material significance of women's work among the lower middle classes as well as the 'newness' of the service economy provide rich material for exploring socio-economic change in India.

To return to the Select Citywalk mall, it inadvertently became one of my most frequented destinations during nine months of ethnographic fieldwork (August 2016 to May 2017) and two follow-up visits (December 2017-January 2018 and July-September 2018). Some of my respondents worked at the mall in shops and cafés whereas for many others, it was the preferred meeting place. In the winter months, we made the most of its expansive outdoor space, whereas in the summer months, we jostled in queues for security check to seek solace in its air-conditioned interiors. Many of my interview recordings and notes carry the senses of the mall – the sound of music in the background; the shining decorations that changed every few weeks to mark occasions

[6] I use the plural 'lower middle classes' to indicate variances of *location* in the construction, composition, and practices of this tenuous category. Rural/urban/peri-urban, regional, religious, and caste locations may influence the topography of class. I was particularly drawn to this point in reviewing work by Ganguly-Scrase (2003); Jeffrey (2010a); and Dickey (2016) on lower middle classes in Kolkata (West Bengal), Meerut (Uttar Pradesh), and Madurai (Tamil Nadu), respectively. While there are subjective similarities between lower middle classes in these varied locations, there are important differences too, particularly of practices of 'distinction', which I discuss further in Chapter 7.

like Independence Day, Diwali, Christmas, or New Year's eve; the anticipation for pizzas, burgers, and chips in its food court; and so on. This is in contrast to the low-income neighbourhoods – Dakshinpuri and Khanpur – that my respondents resided in. With narrow lanes, informal street side markets, food stalls selling *dosas* and *pakoras,* and a mix of housing, these neighbourhoods provided me a 'field site'. However, my respondents – lower middle class women – were more amenable to welcoming me, an upper middle class researcher from abroad, to the mall rather than their homes. The travel between the congested lanes of their neighbourhoods and the new urban spaces of Delhi symbolises these young women's transition into the new economy (Johri and Menon, 2014). However, detracting from the predominant ideas of 'empowerment' and 'aspiration' in the literature on women and work, their narratives reveal ambivalence regarding their participation in service work. Encompassing issues of respectability and vulnerability in navigating precarious labour and life conditions, these complex narratives contribute to understanding youth, work, and socio-economic change in urban India, an area currently overdetermined by young men's experiences.

This introductory chapter defines the scope of the thesis. I first review the emerging literature on the 'New Middle Class' in urban India, drawing attention to the processes of class formations through the study of the liminally located lower middle classes. In doing so, I consider the politics of self-identification and reflect on the etymology of class among my respondents. Second, in the context of this discussion, I turn to the issue of women's work, highlighting gaps in the literature on women and work in urban India. I argue for the significance of women's work to the constitution of class through the links my respondents established between 'high class' or 'open mindedness' and women's education, work, and mobility. In the third section, I consolidate these discussions in proposing that young women's participation in the new economy, characterised by ambivalence, disrupts the linearity of seeking distinction. I finally present an outline of the thesis chapters, which are organised both temporally and thematically. In presenting young women's employment trajectories in the new economy, across cafés, call centres, malls, and offices – seeking, entering, experiencing, and exiting employment – each chapter highlights various aspects of women's labouring lives – temporalities, disidentification, corporeality, and precarity, respectively.

The New Middle Class

With post-1990 economic liberalisation, economic growth, and urbanisation in India, the structure of Indian society has undergone significant change, with 'class' emerging as a key social classification and the 'middle class' particularly taking centre stage. While caste continues to be a significant category and concept for social analysis in India, scholars have noted the growing importance of class, particularly in urban India. This is perhaps because cities offer a chance to their new (or relatively new) residents to remake identities. In their ethnographic study, Fuller and Narasimhan (2014) trace the transformation of rural high caste Tamil Brahmans into an urban middle class, taking up new occupations in nearby big cities. Dickey (2012) too finds that in Madurai lower castes may foreground their class identity, where it is to their advantage, in new and longer-term social settings. The opportunity to remake identities, or more precisely, claim a class identity, might suggest, as Sheth (1999) does in his paper *'The Secularisation of Caste'*, that caste is no longer a hierarchical structure but has become 'horizontalised' with competition within castes to claim entry to the new middle class. He adds that entry into the middle class is still dependent on the ownership of resources, which is very much linked to one's caste status, but 'deritualisation' of caste has led to lower social groups more readily becoming part of the middle class. Deshpande (2003) is, however, sceptical and argues that the predominance of upper castes in the urban middle class has "made caste drop below the threshold of social visibility" (p. 99). The shifting dynamics of social structures in urban India cannot be summarised in a singular argument since the salience of caste and class, in their innumerable patterns of overlap, may vary by context and settings. In my research, while issues of class emerged organically in numerous discussions, caste was highlighted on only a few occasions. Caste was a common concern in issues of marriage, with young women expressing worry over seeking parental approval for 'liking' or wishing to marry someone from another (higher or lower) caste. Further, some respondents referred to the caste-based segregation of lanes in their neighbourhoods – the lanes where *Valmikis* and *Harijans* (low-caste groups) resided were particularly marked out. However, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, despite the close links between caste and occupational stratification, young women foregrounded issues of class in employment. Indeed, it could be argued that entering new service work afforded women an opportunity to detract from 'traditional' labour practices in their families.

This is not to suggest that caste does not influence young women's life experiences and life chances, rather that the predominance of class "is an indication of its salience in the urban imagination"[7] (Dickey, 2016, p. 41).

Amidst contestations over the size of the New Middle Class (Fernandes, 2006; Donner and De Neve, 2011; Corbridge, Harriss and Jeffrey, 2013), scholars have turned to suggest that the New Middle Class is new because there is something not just historically, but *qualitatively* different about the post-1990 middle class. Taking the measures commonly used to estimate the proportion of the middle class – occupation, income, and consumption – Fernandes (2004) argues that the 'newness' of the middle class in India does not necessarily refer to social mobility or a structurally new class, rather it refers to a 'culturally constructed category' defined by 'new economy jobs' and associated consumption practices. The centrality of 'new economy jobs' to the construction of the New Middle Class recalls the employment or occupation approach to the study of class, whereby class categories are based upon the stratification of employment. With foundations in the Marxist analysis of labour, the well-established rationale for the occupational approach is that the type of employment people participate in is both determined by their life-chances *and* determines their life-chances. As Wright (2015) usefully explains, employment is affected by "the cultural, motivational, and educational resources" that a person possesses and impacts upon the "economic status and rewards" that the person accrues (p.5). In the UK, where sociological study of class has a long and rich tradition, Savage *et al.* (2013) combine the occupational approach with social and cultural aspects of class (Bourdieu, 1987), to derive seven main classes in the UK. Based on the Great British Class Survey, they identify the classes as such – elite, established middle class, technical middle class, new affluent workers, traditional working class, emerging service workers, and precariat (on precariat as a class, also see Standing, 2011; Wright, 2015). While similar historical surveys have not been common in India, contemporary qualitative scholarship on the 'New Middle Class' in India tends to adopt a similar, although less categorical, approach.

[7] This new middle class is very much an urban middle class although there are a few studies on rural middle class too, such as, Jeffery, Jeffery and Jeffrey (2004) explore how rich rural Jats may adopt lifestyles to situate themselves as middle class (also see Aslany, 2019 on the urban-rural variations of middle class). Other studies tend to note migration from rural to urban areas in the making of the middle class. For example, Fuller and Narasimhan (2014) examine the transformation of traditional rural Tamil Brahmans into a transnational middle class.

Combining social, cultural, and economic aspects of class, the essence of the 'New Middle Class' can be captured through the figure of the young English-speaking Indian, with an MBA degree, dressed in shirt and trousers, employed at a multi-national company in a metropolitan city.

The position of the New Middle Class in post-liberalisation India is, as such, in large part mediated through its engagement in new service work. While post-independence India was still primarily an agrarian economy, taking steps towards industrial development, post-liberalisation India is decisively moving towards becoming, if it is not already, a service economy. The value added by the services sector to the country's Gross Domestic Product (55.2 per cent in 2017) (*Economic Survey 2017-18*, 2018) is credited to surge in the field of information technology (IT), which includes the development and export of software and IT-dependent services, like call centres. The growth of the service sector has been made possible through opening up the economy to global and private investments and trade, and simultaneous shrinking of the public sector. In 1990-91, the public sector employed 19.06 million people while the private sector employed 7.68 million people. By 2011-12, public sector employment declined to 17.61 million while private sector employment increased to 12.06 million (Reserve Bank of India, 2014). However, it needs to be noted that increase in service employment has not been proportional to the sector's exponential growth, earning it the tag of 'jobless growth' (Joshi, 2004; Banga, 2006; Mukherjee, 2013; Sood, 2016). Further, the transformation of the Indian economy into a service economy has not necessarily resulted in 'formalisation' of work. The informal economy has historically been predominant in the country and continues to be so; indeed it has not shown any signs of shrinking in recent times[8] (Hewison and Kalleberg, 2013; Maiti, 2013), accounting for 88.2 per cent of employment in the country (and 77.6 per cent of service employment) (International Labour Office, 2018). Further, Fernandes (2000) points out that although

[8] The informal economy or the 'hustle' economy is at times even valorised as offering employment or 'entrepreneurial' opportunities without the constraints of formal employment. In early 2018, ahead of the World Economic Forum in Davos, the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, when confronted with the issue of unemployment in the country, proclaimed "If someone opens a pakoda [fritters] shop in front of your office, does that not count as employment? The person's daily earning of Rs.200 [GBP 2] will never come into any books or accounts. The truth is massive people are being employed." These comments widely drew criticism for not only denying unemployment and underemployment but also for celebrating meagre earnings of Rs.200 per day (see my article, *The myth of the Indian 'New Middle Class'*, February 2018, Open Democracy)

the retrenchment of public services following economic restructuring in 1990 has been discussed, similar processes in the private sector in recent years have not been paid adequate attention. The conditions of private service work, she argues, "represent striking points of convergence between the industrial working class and middle class experiences" (p.102). Thus, while India's development story has been narrated through the omnipresence of mobile signals, the rise of the city of Bangalore as the Indian 'Silicon Valley', and the absorption of modern and qualified women into information technology (Mazumdar, 2007; Radhakrishnan, 2011; Belliappa, 2013), the 'underbelly' of services – characterised by the more pervasive semi-skilled, low-paid, and precarious work that relies on exploitation of cheap labour – remains under-explored. It is only relatively recently that the bulk of workers in modern urban spaces, such as, shopping malls (Gooptu, 2009; Johri and Menon, 2014; Srivastava, 2014) and call centres (Remesh and Neetha, 2008; Patel, 2010), have garnered interest.

These varying conditions of work in the new economy disrupt the discursive construction of the singular category of the New Middle Class. The imagination of the New Middle Class as beneficiaries of economic liberalisation does not take into account the variance in the lived experiences of being in the 'middle' (Osella and Osella, 1999; Dickey, 2012; Fuller and Narasimhan, 2014). Derné (2005) offers differentiation between the 'transnational middle class' – those who watch Hollywood films, speak English, are willing to accept new forms of gender relations – and the 'locally oriented middle class'. While Derné's (2005) dichotomous approach goes some way towards disrupting the singularity of the middle class, it is similar to other literature in this area in that it does little to capture the "polymorphous character of the Indian middle class" (Beteille, 2001, p. 79). I agree with Dickey (2012) that despite the proliferation of literature on the New Middle Class, "…we know little about who these middle-class people are, given the epistemological as well as ethnographic gaps in scholars' understandings of India's urban middle classes" (p.560). In this thesis, I, therefore, turn to my respondents to develop a locally grounded understanding of class. The majority of young women in this research identified themselves, their families, and/or their neighbourhoods as 'middle class' or simply as 'middle'. However, this identification was not straightforward or categorical; indeed, class articulations among young women were ambiguous. They commonly used the English term 'middle class' although there were other terms too that they used to refer to their own and others' class. For example,

young women often spoke about being from '*chhote ghar'* or modest homes. They positioned themselves in the middle of poor people or those who do not have a roof over their head and '*bade log'* or big people, '*hi-fi'* people, and *'high class'* people. Deepti, a café worker, used the term 'lower middle class' to differentiate herself from 'proper middle class' –

> "Let me give you an example, the people who come to our cafés to drink coffee, are *high class*. If our manager says he's *middle class*, that's acceptable. His salary is Rs.50,000 [GBP 500], he has a car, a house, everything. Things that he needs to live, he has them. We have to do so much more to survive, only we know, so we can't be *middle class*. If we have money, we eat, if we don't…We could call ourselves *lower middle class*. I guess there are people below us too but we're definitely not *proper middle class*."

While Deepti's differentiation between 'proper middle class' and 'lower middle class' provides clarity for English speakers, other respondents mostly used the terms 'high class' or 'hi-fi' to refer to the secure middle class and the term 'middle class' to refer to lower or tenuous middle class. Some respondents told me on a few occasions that I am clearly not 'middle class' but 'high class' – when I probed further, they said they could tell from the way I talked and behaved[9]. Therefore, for these young women, 'middle class' (which implied insecurity and tenuousness) was not necessarily a desirable position to inhabit. In dissociating themselves from the 'affliction' of middle-classness, young women distinguished between material and cultural aspects of class. While their material conditions – that are best described as 'getting by' – did not allow much distance from middle-classness, they could claim transcendence beyond the middle class through symbolic distinctions of attitude, behaviour, and consumption (further discussed in the next section). While this distancing may appear in contrast to the literature in the West (where middle class may be desirable position), it should be read

[9] Through the identification of my respondents – living in one-bedroom flats, earning close to minimum wage in Delhi, talking about 'getting by' – as middle class, I was compelled to examine my own previous identification as middle class. That all of us identified ourselves as middle class, despite wide class differences between us, reaffirms the argument that people tend to see themselves as in the 'middle'. A Pew Research Centre report in 2015, measuring distribution of income globally, suggested that contrary to claims, there is a barely expanded middle class in India (Kochhar and Oates, 2015). This is set against the much larger number of people who identify as middle class (*Everyone in India thinks they are 'middle class' and almost no one actually is*, July 2015, Scroll.in)

keeping in mind the *language* of class among these young women in Delhi (see Phadi and Manda, 2010 for discussion on language of class among non-English speakers).

Based on young women's tenuous articulations of class in comparison to those around them, I understand class not as a static category but as relational and processual. That is, class is in the process of formation not necessarily "based on recognising oneself as belonging to a given position", but through "differentiating oneself from others in a field, through comprehending and playing the game with its various stakes and players," (Devine and Savage, 2005, p. 14) (also see, Dickey, 2016) (I delve into the significance of 'disidentification' in the formulation of subjectivities in Chapter 4). As such, classes are not clearly demarcated categories, instead the boundaries between social classes are like "flames whose edges are in constant movement" (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 13). Young women's simultaneous hesitation in claiming and disavowal of middle-classness may, in part, be a reflection of cultural understandings and discourses of class. For example, Devine & Savage (2005) argue that "… [social classes] can be more readily expressed in America than in Britain because they are not so bound up with status distinctions and notions of superiority and inferiority that have a long historical legacy in Britain" (p.19). However, more importantly, uncertainties and disavowal of class may also reflect the 'in-betweenness' or 'liminality' (Turner, 1967, 1969) of class positions. Reay (1997) offers a sophisticated analysis of class identifications and silences in Britain, using the case of Christine, a woman who grew up working class but came to see herself as 'classless' through her upward mobility. Interviewed for Reay's (1997) research on mothers' involvement in children's schooling, Christine said – "…well I'm not working-class any more and I'm not middle class either. To be honest I think we're all classless now" (p.228). Reay (1997) argues that Christine resists class identification because of the "tenuousness of her social class positioning" –

> "It is not surprising that women like Christine resist class labels because they recognise the uncertain, shifting territory they occupy; a class landscape of 'maybe' and 'perhaps' where personal history shapes current consciousness and where there are none of the certainties of conventional middle-class horizons." (p.228)

The respondents for this research, similarly, expressed uncertainty in articulating class identification (although they did not describe themselves or others as 'classless')

because they are tenuously located between working class and middle class positions, perhaps best described, as Deepti did, as *lower middle class*. Drawing upon the anthropologist Turner's (1967, 1969) concept of the 'liminal' (further discussed later in the chapter), I propose that these young women are 'betwixt and between' class positions, whereby "the state of the ritual subject (the 'passenger') is ambiguous" (Turner, 1967, p. 94). The thesis aims to explore the experiences of *lower middle class* youth in the new economy, which remain under-explored in the literature on the secure New Middle Class in India.

In the service economy in India, there is stratification, to put it simply, between the securely middle class English-speaking, computer-efficient professional, with an MBA degree, and the vast majority of lower middle class workers who learn basic English not from their families or at school, but at employability skills training centres; who do not have MBAs, but pursue higher education through distance learning; in other words, who do not have ready access to 'capital' that can be converted to advantage in the 'field' of service economy. Here Bourdieu's concepts of 'field', 'capital', and 'habitus' become useful. Using the analogy of sports, Bourdieu (1977, 2000) conceptualised the settings in which individuals or 'agents' are located as 'field', delimited by a set of 'objective conditions' or a set of rules. To play the 'game', agents require certain kinds and volume of 'capital' or resources, which may be economic, social, cultural, or symbolic. 'Field' and 'capital' operate in the form of a hermeneutic circle - "…in order to construct the field, one must identify the forms of specific capital that operate within it, and to construct the forms of specific capital one must know the specific logic of the field" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 108). While the limits of the field are not impermeable, I propose that the new service economy in India, with its unique and specific competency requirements – education at least to higher secondary level, English speaking, basic computers – constitutes a field in itself. Many employability skills training centres have mushroomed in low-income neighbourhoods of Delhi to provide training to youth through short-term and low-cost courses to meet these new requirements in the new economy. However, these competencies are not merely 'skills' that can be learnt, they are rather 'ways of being' that are ideally incorporated into workers' 'habitus'. If 'field' is the game, 'habitus' is the 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), acquired as a matter of course, rather than deliberately, through "individual history" as well as "the whole collective history of family and class" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 91). Habitus manifests

through individuals' behaviour, attitudes, comportment, and conduct. One could argue that it is through 'habitus' that stratification between workers is produced in the field of service work.

The global trend towards the predominance of services has invoked new conceptualisations of labour, with scholars suggesting a shift from material to 'immaterial' labour (Lazzarato, 1996; Hardt, 1999; Hochschild, 2003; Gill and Pratt, 2008). Analysing the work of flight attendants and bill collectors in the United States, Hochschild (2003) suggests that workers are increasingly involved in 'emotional labour', that is, the transaction of emotions for wages. Although she differentiates between 'surface acting' and 'deep acting', with the latter being instrumental to 'middle class' work, Hochschild does not fully explore the differential classed *capabilities* of workers to engage in emotional labour. Drawing attention to these dynamics, Otis (2012) points out that while the flight attendants in Hochschild's study may have already had access to middle class feminine repertoires of emotional labour that could be transposed from the family to the workplace, workers who lack access to the 'appropriate' economies of emotions need 'working upon'. In these emerging economies of emotions, workers' success is dependent upon being able to appeal to the middle class customers and clients in service provision. It is, therefore, not surprising that in the bourgeoning skills training centres in India, a key component of training courses is 'personality development' and 'communication skills', which "prepare students to engage with a distinctive class culture that characterizes corporate settings...[through] acquisition of manners, taste and style, 'the symbolic capital' (Bourdieu, 2010 [1984]) perceived as necessary for an upwardly mobile middle class individual" (Fernandes, 2000, p.92) (also see, Gooptu, 2013a; Nambiar, 2013). The majority of my respondents were pursuing undergraduate degrees and some even postgraduate degrees through distance learning. Beyond acquiring higher education, they attempted to gain an edge in the competitive service economy by 'skilling' themselves in English speaking, computers, customer management, data management, etc. They were further 'trained' in maintaining eye contact, smiling (a little but not too much), handshakes, and greetings in English to serve upper middle class customers (I discuss the *process* of becoming professionals and young women's reflections on it in Chapter 4).

The simultaneous processes of 'working upon' and being 'worked upon' to *belong* in the new economy can be captured through the concept of 'subjectivity'. In distinguishing between 'subjectivity' and 'identity', some scholars have argued that "subjectivity refers to the more conflictual, complex and cross-category processes by which a person or a self gets to be produced (see, e.g., Venn, 2006)" (Lawler, 2014, p. 8). Although similar arguments have been made about the contingency of 'identity' (and indeed 'identity' and 'subjectivity' are often used interchangeably), Weedon (2004) suggests, "Identity is perhaps best understood as a limited and temporary fixing for the individual of a particular mode of subjectivity as apparently what one *is*" (p.19). Therefore, in this thesis I specifically deploy 'subjectivity' to encapsulate the *process* of subject-formation through simultaneous 'subjectification', that is, the constitution of the subject through subjection (Foucault, 1984, 1988) and 'self-conscious stylization' (McNay, 2000, p. 9). This understanding of 'subjectivity', that builds upon the Foucauldian dialectic of freedom and constraint, is crucial to understanding social change (McNay, 2000). What are the implications of subjecting workers to upper middle class comportment in the new economy? Further, what subject positions do lower middle class workers actively stylize for themselves to seek belonging in the new economy? Workers' subjectivities, as scholars have demonstrated (du Gay, 1996; McDowell, 1998; Gooptu, 2009), are not confined to workplaces but spill over into everyday lives, often in particularly intimate ways. As new entrants to the modern service economy come to engage with the dynamics of the immaterial labour required in the spaces of cafés, call centres, malls, and offices, they acquire not only skills but a 'way of being' that interacts with their gender, class, and caste, in specific local and contextual ways.

Born at the cusp of the twenty-first century in the country's capital, the young women of this research are then truly 'liberalisation's children' (Lukose, 2009), much more familiar with the urban villages and malls of Delhi than the rural landscapes that their parents and grandparents migrated from. To return to the leitmotif of this research – the Select Citywalk mall in South Delhi - it is striking to note that this looming structure, that now occupies a central place in the imaginary of this worlding city, is as recent as 2007. These recent urban spaces – malls, cafés, high-rise office buildings[10] – reveal

[10] Growing up in the small city of Aligarh, Delhi was the closest metropolitan for me. Visiting Delhi occasionally from 2006 onwards, I can recall these changes in the urban landscape of India. Indeed, I remember the first time I went to a McDonalds, Pizza Hut, or Starbucks. The first two decades of the

changing lifestyles in the city, but for the purpose of this thesis, they are also significant as places of work. Through the labour they participate in (service work), as well as the labour to become competitors in the job market (through skilling, training, personality development), workers attempt to find their place in the new hierarchies of transformed urban landscapes in India. For workers, participation in new work and new workspaces may offer an opportunity to redefine their subjectivities (although there are also predictably various constraints, that is, work does not provide a blank slate to workers). As workers not engaging in typically and traditionally 'working class' occupations – tilling the farm, rickshaw pulling, daily wage labour, domestic work, and so on – the neophyte service professionals are fashioning new 'selves' in the new economy.

The New Indian Woman

In 2018, the annual Economic Survey of India report was published with a pink cover –

> "…as a symbol of support for the growing movement to end violence against women, which spans continents. Addressing the deep societal meta-preference in favor of sons, and empowering women with education and reproductive and economic agency are critical challenges for the Indian economy…" (*Economic Survey 2017-18*, 2018, p. vii)

The chapter on gender in the report assesses performance of the country on gender against agency, attitudes, and outcomes in both 'chronological' and 'development' time. It notes that the only two cases where India is lagging behind progress in *development time* is 'women's employment' and 'sex of last child'. Although employment is not the focus of the report, it notes the value of women's employment not only to gender equality but also to economic growth – "Recently at Davos, IMF chief Christian Lagarde…said that women's participation in the workforce to the level of men can boost the Indian economy by 27 per cent" (*Economic Survey 2017-18*, 2018, p. 103). This concern with women's participation in the workforce in India stems from the low and declining female labour force participation (FLFP) rate in the country, noted earlier in the chapter. Besides concern with 'productivity' (which does not take into account

twenty first century have been significant in *concretising* these spaces, both literally and metaphorically, making them an inextricable part of the urban imagination.

women's unpaid labour), the push to encourage women to participate in paid work is also premised on the 'empowering' potential of employment. Although economic dependency influences gender relations, the singular vision that "work would liberate women from male domination" is problematic, as hooks (1984) points out in the context of the feminist movement in the US. Critiquing the central tenet of Betty Friedan's '*The Feminine Mystique'* that "the most pressing problem for women was the need to get outside the home and work to cease being 'just' housewives", hooks (1984) comments that the feminist movement "ignored the fact that a vast majority of women were (even at the time *The Feminine Mystique* was published) already working outside the home, working in jobs that neither liberated them from dependence on men nor made them economically self-sufficient" (p.95) (also see, Dhawan, 2010). Drawing upon hooks (1984), I argue that while the majority of literature has been pre-occupied with the conundrum of low female labour force participation rate in India, there is a need to understand the *experiences* of women who do not have access to 'high paying careers' in the new service economy.

Whilst not singularly empowering, new service work may offer young women "enclaves of urban labour markets" (Neetha, 2014, p. 57). In turn, the visibility of women in the new urban spaces of post-liberalisation India may fulfil the imagination of a 'modern' nation. As Oza (2006) notes, the New Indian Woman "…[occupies] a central locus of concern within middle class public debates because the anxiety associated with a globalizing nation-state [is] displaced onto women's bodies and practices" (p.24). The New Indian Woman is, as such, central to the constitution of the New Middle Class – modern yet traditional, global yet Indian, professional yet homemaker, the New Indian Woman traverses the public and the private through her career (Rajan, 1993, pp. 124–139; Dhawan, 2010; Lau, 2010). However, the vast majority of 'new women' who participate in the new economy, and negotiate emerging subjectivities, are unable to access 'high paying careers'. The participation of lower middle class women in paid work is, as such, caught between necessity and aspiration. While the respondents for this research asserted their *choice* in seeking employment, they also reflected on their families' vulnerable financial situations. While they specifically emphasised that they were participating in 'respectable' services, they also reflected on low pay, lack of progression opportunities, and exploitative working conditions. And finally, while they did not envision building 'careers' in these fields, they nevertheless rejected becoming

'housewives' and associated their employment with 'high-class' thinking. Meeta, a café worker, told me that although she lives with her family in Dakshinpuri, a middle class area, her family's thinking is *not* middle class. "In what way?" I asked; Meeta responded – "Like a lot of times I hear about they're saying this and that to their daughters. That kind of thing doesn't happen at my home. So, I think of my family's thinking as *high class*." In fashioning themselves as 'open minded', young women characterised restrictions on women's education, mobility, and employment as rural, backward, and old fashioned.

The desirability for and acceptance of women's employment is in part underpinned by associated social changes, particularly women's education. In 2014-15, the number of female students exceeded the number of male students enrolled in primary and secondary education. In higher education, there is still a gender gap but it is narrowing – in 1990-91, there were only 46 girls per 100 boys whereas in 2014-15, the figure increased to 85 girls per 100 boys (*Education Statistics at a Glance*, 2016). Equipped with higher education levels than their parents, many young women distanced themselves from the position of 'housewife' through the rhetoric – 'Why would I sit at home when I'm educated?!' (further discussed in Chapter 3). Although there is debate over the impact of education on women's employment – Abraham (2013) suggests negligible influence of education on employment for women whereas Andres *et al.* (2017) argue that there is a U-shaped relationship between education and employment among women – it nevertheless signals shifts in life expectations for young lower middle class women. Alongside increasing level of education, the mean age of marriage for women in urban areas has also been on the rise. The mean age of marriage for urban women increased to 23.1 years in 2016 from 22.4 years in 2012 (*Women and Men in India (A statistical compilation of Gender related Indicators in India)*, 2019, p. 14).

The desirability for employment among women (and associated social changes) is, however, not necessarily reflected in the female labour force participation rate in the country. Besides the strong possibility of underreporting of women's work (Sudarshan and Bhattacharya, 2008), I also suggest that there is a need to understand data on labour force participation alongside data on employment/unemployment. While the labour force participation rate refers to the proportion of people in the workforce out of the total population of working age, the unemployment rate is calculated as the number

of people out of work among the 'active' workforce, that is, people who are either in work or actively looking for work. Therefore, while labour force participation rate may offer insights into the differentials in motivation or incentive among men and women to seek employment, unemployment rate may point to availability of opportunities and issues of retention in the workforce. Further, there is a need to disaggregate such data by sector and nature of work. Overall, among women who are in the workforce, an overwhelming number are still concentrated in agriculture despite urbanisation and the growth of services. This may indicate that as men migrate to urban areas for work opportunities, women may be left behind to rely on subsistence agriculture (Mazumdar and Neetha, 2011). However, if we further disaggregate the spread of women who are in the workforce, we find that there is a trend towards service work among young women (20-29 years) in urban areas. In 2009-10, 59 per cent of women workers in the age bracket of 20-24 years and 58.2 per cent of women workers in the age bracket of 25-29 years in urban India were employed in the tertiary sector (Mitra and Verick, 2013, all data derived from National Sample Survey 2009-10). Strikingly, the rate of unemployment among urban women is also highest for young women in the age bracket of 20-24 years in urban areas – at 18.78 per cent, it is almost double the unemployment rate for urban men in the same age bracket (9.68 per cent) (ibid). However, discussions of unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, are generally premised on men's unemployment. Women's unemployment, on the other hand, tends to be marginalised in these discussions. The marginalisation of women's unemployment, I suggest, is due to its absorption into 'domesticity'. While men's unemployment might result in their increased visibility in public spaces – at corner shops, tea stalls, on the street – and might manifest as socially disruptive behaviour (Jervis, Spicer and Manson, 2003; Mains, 2007; Jeffrey, 2010a), women's unemployment is subsumed into the space of home (further discussed in Chapter 3). This highlights the plurality of women's labour and raises questions about the adequacy of the employment approach to the study of class.

Although the employment approach to the study of class offers insights into the formation of middle-classness through young women's engagement in service work, it does not necessarily encapsulate the *value* of women's work in itself. Indeed, young women highlighted their entry into employment, more generally, as a marker of open-mindedness. Of course, the *kind* of employment they entered – semi-skilled work in the

service economy – was inextricably bound to this claim but they positioned employment, *in itself*, as an activity central to class making. Critiquing the employment approach to the study of class, Crompton (1999) writes –

> "…a major feminist criticism of occupational class schemes has been that, because of the persistence of sex discrimination within the labour market, together with patterns of occupational segregation, such schemes (a) produce very different outcomes when applied to male and female populations, and (b) the same occupation (ie, class situation) may be associated with different 'life chances' for men and women." (p.165)

Highlighting the critical difference in life chances of men and women, Crompton (ibid) uses the example of clerical jobs that in twentieth century Britain were a "pathway to management for men" and "dead end occupation for women" (p.180). These gendered differences in the understanding of formations of classes have historically been overlooked because, regardless of the adopted approach, the mainstream study of class has been premised on (and mostly carried out by) men. In the case of middle class women in the new service economy in India, Fernandes (2006) notes that the larger segment of middle class female workers is concentrated in lower-tier clerical work which tends to be temporary contract work. She further illustrates –

> "…a well-known foreign bank routinely hires temporary staff in various departments. While individuals are hired in the securities department and paid a competitive salary, the bank requires a break in a temporary worker's employment after three or four months. After a break of six to nine months the individual can accept another temporary job at the bank. This example is typical of the employment situation of the lower tier of white-collar work—and the majority of middle class women." (p.103)

The young women of this research too reflected on the lack of progression opportunities in their jobs, where they worked under the direction of overwhelmingly male managers (I discuss this in detail in Chapter 6). One of my respondents, Deepti, who worked in a multinational café, clearly laid out the gender and class dynamics of her workplace for me. She pointed out a common trend in service jobs – "You see in our café, shift managers are all girls, in the morning. But at higher level, it's all men." She co-related this gender hierarchy to class hierarchy in the workplace, as noted earlier, by pointing

out that while the (male) manager is 'proper middle class', earning Rs.50,000 (GBP 500 per month, the (female) employees are, at best, 'lower middle class', earning only Rs.8,000-12,000 (GBP 80-120) per month.

With little scope for progression and insecure contracts, young women often moved from one job to another, with periods of unemployment in between (further discussed in Chapter 6). Alongside employment, and particularly in their periods of unemployment, they engaged in housework since "shifting employment patterns do not necessarily transform household gendered divisions of labor" (Fernandes, 2006, p.102). That is, despite rejecting the subject position of 'housewives', young women were compelled to participate in housework to a certain extent. However, the occupational approach to the study of class limits the assessment of class to paid work, glossing over the significance of unpaid labour in the constitution of class. Thus, Crompton (2000) points out, "There is also the problem of establishing a 'class' situation for those without employment…such as housewives and other dependents" (p.165). This reiterates the neglect of 'reproductive labour'[11], a concept that emerged through feminist critique of Marxism for its failure to account for activities that sustain the workforce – cooking, cleaning, caring, and so on – carried out predominantly by women all over the world (Duffy, 2007; Federici, 2009). My research further nuances Crompton's (1999, 2010) critique by highlighting the movement of young women in and out of occupations, coeval to their participation in unpaid housework.

It would however be erroneous to suggest that scholars have not accounted for women's unpaid labour in class analysis at all. For example, Papanek (1979) introduces the concept of 'status producing work' in her paper *'Family Status Production: The "Work" and "Non-Work" of Women'*, to understand the "latent meaning of work" done by women to maintain the status of families (p.780). Separate from housework, such status-production work includes unpaid activities, such as, support work for income earning family members, training of children, preparation of feasts, religious observances as well as demonstrating 'appropriate behaviour'. Papanek (ibid) argues, "In the middle strata,

[11] Through feminist theorising over the years, the concept of 'reproductive labour' has been widened to encompass not only unpaid but also *undervalued* labour, predominantly done by women. Although activities, such as, caring, cooking, cleaning, have come to be 'outsourced', and thus paid, they persist as sites of inequalities, not only of gender, but also of class and race (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002; Boris and Parreñas, 2010).

where social mobility is most possible and most sought after, women are most often subjected to restrictions on behalf of family status and most likely to spend time on status-production work" (p.779). Similarly, Bourdieu (2010 [1984]) suggests that in the sexual division of labour, women are assigned the responsibility for converting economic capital into symbolic capital for their families by displaying 'tastes'. While this speaks to Papanek's analysis of women's crucial role in status-production, Bourdieu's understanding of women as 'capital-bearing objects' rather than as 'capital-accumulating subjects' has been amply criticised by feminist scholars (McCall, 1992; Lovell, 2004; Skeggs, 2004b; Silva, 2016). Besides assigning women the role of 'repositories' for capital accumulation, Bourdieu maintains a binary association of women with the domestic, family or personal life and men with the public sphere throughout his work (McCall, 1992, p. 848). The public/private division in understanding class is problematic for various reasons but in the context of this discussion, it poses a particular dilemma – can women's multiple forms of labour, including unpaid labour, be accounted for in class analysis without reproducing the association of women with home and men with 'work'? Particularly, as globally more women participate in income generating activities but continue to be overwhelmingly responsible for unpaid reproductive labour, what kind of class analysis can comprehensively account for the significance of employment without excluding other forms of labour?

To address these questions, it is important to examine the concepts of 'work', 'employment', and 'labour', often used synonymously. Arendt, in *The Human Condition* (1998), identifies 'labour' and 'work' as distinct on the simple basis that most European languages contain different terms for these seemingly similar activities. In Hindi too, there are various terms in circulation – *kaam, mazdoori, naukri* – that refer to work, labour, employment, respectively. However, their meanings may vary by local context. For example, Parry (2013) describes how workers on a public-sector Indian steel plant differentiated between *naukri* as secure employment and *kam* as insecure wage labour, resulting in social distinctions between the two groups. The respondents for this research also drew upon circulating terms (in English and Hindi) – *kaam* or 'jobs' to refer to short-term work, 'career' to refer to long-term professional engagement that yields higher rewards, and 'labour-type' work to refer to manual work, such as, cleaning. Arendt (1998) traces the history of 'work' and 'labour' to explore the changing

understandings of the human condition. While work/labour were indistinguishable and equally reviled in ancient Greece, modern day espousal of labour brought forth several related conceptions of productive and unproductive labour, skilled and unskilled work, and intellectual and manual labour. Through their historical and contemporary usage, and reliant on a Marxist understanding, Arendt (ibid) proposes that labour is natural while work is artifice – "The human condition of labour is life itself" (p.7).

Labour is then a broader conceptualisation than both work and employment and is integral to life. Even the "unemployed and those dependent on others' earnings", to return to Crompton (2000, p.165), labour for sustenance of life. Further, I suggest, it more adequately captures the experiences of workers, particularly lower middle class women workers, in the new economy, which is characterised by precarious contracts. In the movement in and out of employment, young women may engage in various strategies to secure livelihoods, including further studies, skills training, housework, and care work. An approach that accounts for 'labour' rather than 'employment' can help to overcome the marginalisation of women in class analysis, whilst recognising the growth in women's employment as well as the women's continued overwhelming participation in unpaid work. Indeed, these changes indicate the centrality of the broader concept of labour – which encompasses but is not limited to employment, skilled/unskilled, or productive/reproductive work – in the co-constitution of gender and class. Through the changing value of tropes of the stay-at-home mother, the wife who doesn't *need* to work, the career woman, we can chart transformations in gender and class formations. An approach that accounts for labour would require a move away from surveys that devise employment aggregates to in-depth studies of labouring lives; I further explore these implications in Chapter 2 which describes my methodological approach.

Women, work, distinction

This thesis positions young women's engagement in the new economy as a practice of 'distinction' in the struggle to claim a stake in the 'New Middle Class' in urban India. The reference to 'distinction' borrows from the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) well known monograph '*Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste'*. Carefully coded and presented in neat tables, Bourdieu (2010) develops persuasive analysis establishing co-relation between cultural practices, educational capital, and social origin. He argues that the dominant classes determine legitimacy of cultural practices,

whereby legitimate cultural practices (of language, food, art, clothing, and so on) yield "a profit in distinction" (p.225). However, while I draw upon Bourdieu's tools, *where useful,* the thesis is *led by* my respondents' lived experiences and narratives. This point merits establishing since reliance on a Bourdieusian analysis is not entirely adequate for this research for the following reasons. One, while Bourdieu's concepts have been widely deployed in social analyses in the UK and US, they have had limited exposure in the 'Global South', which calls into question their portability. Indeed, one may interrogate the ethics of the attempt to *fit* Eurocentric knowledge to a 'non-Western' and postcolonial context. Two, while Bourdieu provides compelling tools for class analysis, he has been heavily criticised by feminist scholars for lack of attention to and engagement with gender relations[12]. Three, Bourdieu is known as a theorist of social reproduction, rather than social change. The extent to which Bourdieu's concepts can provide a frame to understand the experiences of young women in the context of socio-economic change in India is, as such, limited. However, despite the possible pitfalls of employing Bourdieusian analysis, I find feminist re-appropriations of Bourdieu to be a compelling entry point into this research. In this section, I outline my motivations for deploying Bourdieusian tools to understand the lives of young women workers in Delhi, India. These motivations are underscored by the ways in which in which I interpret, detract from, and adapt these theoretical tools.

Within the scope of this project, I envision trekking Bourdieusian tools from their application in France, UK, and the US to urban India as "intervening in the discipline from the inside by demonstrating the inadequacies of current sociological accounts…of the global…" (Bhambra and Santos, 2017, p. 4) (I discuss this further in Chapter 7). The advantage to be gained from Bourdieu's understanding of class as an amalgam of economic, cultural, and social, is that it "allows us to incorporate the most mundane details of everyday life in our analyses" (Moi, 1991, p. 1019), that is, it calls upon a sociological imagination in parsing that which is taken for granted or assumed. Bourdieu (2010 [1984]) exemplifies this approach in *'Distinction'* whereby he exposes the links between social origin, educational capital, occupation, and *taste,* which is an "area par excellence of the denial of the social" (p.3). This 'everyday' conceptualisation of class, "less substantializing" than the Marxian conception of class (Butler, 1999, p.

[12] While the thesis primarily discusses feminist critique of Bourdieu, his work has also been scrutinised similarly by scholars of race (Wallace, 2017).

113), importantly makes visible the *process of class formation*. The concept of class formation not only exposes the *processual* nature of class (Dickey, 2012, 2016), it also provides an insight into what it means to live, inhabit, and struggle over class. Further, Reay (1997) suggests, it is more useful as a concept than 'class positions' for feminist theory to develop more nuanced understanding of women's multiple social locations. Among young women of this research, participation in employment facilitated (limited) economic and cultural claims to 'high class'. In other words, as the thesis chapters will show, young women participated in boundary-making through their employment. In '*Distinction*' (1984), Bourdieu considers sexual division of labour as important to understanding class –

> "Sexual properties are as inseparable from class properties as the yellowness of a lemon is from its acidity: a class is defined in an essential respect by the place and value it gives to the two sexes and to their socially constituted dispositions. This is why there are as many ways of realizing femininity as there are classes and class fractions, and the division of labour between the sexes takes quite different forms, both in practices and in representations, in the different social classes." (p.102)

Although a succinct summary of co-constitution of gender and class, Bourdieu largely limits the role of women to the display of tastes, "given the logic of the division of labour between the sexes" (Bourdieu, 2010 [1984], p.103), whereby "women are most identified with what is variously called the domestic, family, or personal life" (McCall, 1992, p. 848). In this thesis, I find value in deploying 'distinction' over the concomitant concepts of 'respectability', 'value', and 'credibility' since the process of seeking distinction can offer insights into the *struggle* over respectability, value, and credibility in the context of socio-economic change. However, I also detract from Bourdieu's approach to sexual division of labour (and hence to women's role) by understanding women's participation in employment as a cultural practice that is not merely a way to accumulate capital but also a way to *generate* capital. Rather than maintaining the dichotomy of home/work, I draw attention to the multiplicity and continuum of women's labour, as detailed in the previous section. In that, positioning women's engagement in the new economy as a practice of distinction is an attempt to recover

women as agents, rather than merely 'aesthetic objects' (Silva, 2016, p. 175), in the formations of class.

Further, while the central tenet of *'Distinction'* is the *struggle* for legitimacy of tastes, which suggests contestations, dilemmas, even violence, Bourdieu does not explore the 'affective' dimensions of class. As Skeggs (1997) puts it, "…Bourdieu's *Distinction…*does ultimately code behaviour in a cold and mechanical classificatory manner which does not bring out the pleasures and pain associated with gender, class, and sexuality" (p.10). This is partly the case because, Bourdieu's interest lies in establishing 'objective' co-relation between class and tastes. However, notwithstanding Bourdieu's silence on affect, scholars have engaged the concept of 'habitus' not only to draw attention to the corporeal (McNay, 1999) but also to the emotional and the psychological of class – for example, Probyn (2004) offers the addendum of 'affective habitus' by drawing upon the earlier version of habitus by Mauss as a point of assemblage for "the physiological-psychological-sociological" (p.244). The affect ignored by Bourdieu, Skeggs (2004c) argues, is apparent in the daily class struggles of the working class, as noted by ethnographers, such as, Charlesworth (1999) and Willis (1997). These emotions are made invisible in Bourdieu's evaluation of the working class through the "dominant symbolic" (Skeggs, 2004c, p. 87), whereby working classes are always marked as 'deficient', 'lacking', and resigned to their fate (Bennett *et al.*, 2009). Reading with and against Bourdieu, Skeggs (2004) offers 'emptiness of habitus' as a concept to explore working class resistance. She suggests –

> "We also need to be able to understand the habitus of recalcitrance, of non-belonging, of not caring, those who refuse to make a virtue out of necessity, the 'f*** off' and 'so what' of utterances, the radical emptiness of the habitus." (p.89)

In this thesis, I consider young women's daily struggles to negotiate belonging in the new economy as neophyte workers from the vantage point of their tenuous *lower middle class* identification. Lower middle class is a position that falls 'in-between' neat categorisations of class. It is a position marked by the fear of falling into poverty and with limited access to the security of the stable middle class. This tenuousness may manifest in *simultaneous* aspiration to and rejection of the 'dominant symbolic'. On the one hand, these young women, with higher educational capital, claim value through their participation in the new economy. On the other, they accrue costs in the course of

their participation and, as the thesis will show, interrogate, contest, and partly reject the dominant symbolic practices. In '*Distinction*', Bourdieu (1984) offers the category of 'petit bourgeois' whose habitus is "straddled between the habitus of…two classes. Distancing itself from working-class culture of the necessary, this aspires to the effortless and at-ease cultural familiarity of the bourgeoisie without ever being able to achieve it" (Bennett, 2010, p. xxi). Bourdieu (1990) points out –

> "…to strive for distinction is the opposite of distinction: firstly because it involves recognition of a lack and the avowal of a self-seeking aspiration, and secondly because, as can easily be seen in the petit bourgeoisie, consciousness and reflexivity are both cause and symptom of the failure of immediate adaptation to the situation which defines the virtuoso." (p.11)

While I describe the lower middle classes through similar *straddling* of habitus, I contest the unquestioning aspiration or ambition to achieve the cultural familiarity of the bourgeoisie. The lower middle class has commonly been assumed, by virtue of its 'in-betweenness', to be transitioning, or at least *aspiring* to transition, towards middle class position. The emphasis on "aspiration as a mediating force that binds the lower strata of the middle classes to the elite, high-caste urban professionals" (Vijayakumar, 2013, p. 778), however, fails to capture the "messy amalgam of symbolic practices, structures of feeling, and forms of life" (Felski, 2000, p. 35) that characterises lower middle class life.

A range of concepts can assist in further elaborating upon and theorising the 'in-betweenness' of working class/middle class, housewife/professional, and necessity/aspiration. In this thesis, I find value in deploying the concept of the 'liminal' to focus on *instability*, and thus, to provide a magnified view of the process and dynamics of class and gender formations, which may not be easily visible through analysis of stable class identifications. The concept of the 'liminal' was developed by the anthropologist Turner (1967, 1969) (drawing upon the work of the anthropologist van Gennep) to elaborate upon the middle stage of the 'rites of passage' in kinship communities. In anthropology, 'liminal' or 'liminality' has been variously used. The open-ended nature of the concept lends itself to multiple meanings, encompassing boundaries, marginality, and interstitiality. For this thesis, which concerns itself with young women's practices of boundary-making, experiences of marginality, as well as interstitial place-making, the concept of 'liminal', thus, has its attractions (Ghannam,

2011; Wels *et al.*, 2011; Silva, 2016). These young women's liminality, however, is not a reference to the 'essentially unstructured' that Turner (1967) attends to. It is rather an attempt to pry open that which is 'interstructural'; in other words, that which is ambiguous and ambivalent by virtue of being between structures, pushed and pulled in both directions. Further, while the middle stage of the rites of passage is expected to lead to a final resolution, in this thesis, I understand liminality not as "a temporary transition through which identity is reconstructed" but "as a more longitudinal experience of ambiguity and in-between-ness within a changeful context" (Beech, 2011, p. 288). I, therefore, explore the "expressions of anxiety, insecurity and pain around class" (Lawler, 1999, p. 6) when one is not in-transition but is stranded in-between.

Finally, there is a need to revisit the frame of social reproduction offered by Bourdieu. Criticising Bourdieu's analysis for being too deterministic with little scope to account for the possibility of social change (McLeod, 2005), scholars have engaged with and re-appropriated the concept of 'habitus'. In conceptualising the relationship between 'field' and 'habitus', Bourdieu's concern is with how social norms are perpetuated in various specialised arenas. As such, he does not account for what happens when there isn't a seamless fit between the two (McNay, 1999) as may be the case with young women entering new fields of work in late capitalist societies, including in the context of this research. Lovell (2000) further argues that in recent and unexpected ways, femininity has gained capital in the labour market, signalling changes in the field – "The recent dramatic closing of the gap between genders in educational achievement in western society, and the predictable 'moral panic' over 'underachieving boys' is surely related to the manner in which the labour market is shifting" (p.25). The shifts in labour market in urban India, as noted earlier in the chapter, have created limited enclaves of employment in services for young women. But, as highlighted in previous sections, young women enter new service professions on the lower end, already characterised by 'lack' of fluent English, 'appropriate' emotional repertoires, and a 'fitting' bodily comportment (further discussed in Chapter 5). Their 'belonging' in the field is, as such, not straightforward. This raises questions over Bourdieu's account of 'the practical sense' or 'habitus' as 'feel for the game'. As Lovell (2000) asks, "[how]…do some women manage to develop a good feel for 'games' from which they are excluded by virtue of their sex?" (p.14). Entering new spaces as 'neophytes' (Turner, 1969), to what extent do young women reflect on and negotiate this belonging/non-belonging? Do they acquire a

'self-consciousness' "from venturing into male-dominated fields, from taking a gendered disposition into a position that does not fit in" (McCall, 1992, p. 849)? Further, what are the implications of the awareness of lack of fit between field and habitus? To understand young lower middle class women's participation in service work in urban India, I therefore adopt a re-appropriated Bourdieusian framework, accounting for the pliability of habitus (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Silva, 2016).

Outline of the thesis

While this chapter presented the broad context, scope, and theoretical underpinnings of the thesis, the following Chapter 2, presents the specifics of the research. It details the methodological approach I adopted in conducting this research, including dilemmas of research practice and knowledge production. It also offers detailed information about the respondents, situating them against the background of an emerging middle class in post-liberalisation India presented in this chapter. Together, Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 set the stage for the following four chapters that present the ethnographic findings through a temporal arc – seeking, entering, experiencing, and leaving employment.

Chapter 3 begins with exploring young women's motivations to seek, enter, and stay in employment. The respondents live with their families in low-income neighbourhoods in small one-bedroom flats. In reflecting upon their families' navigation of everyday financial vulnerabilities, they view their employment as significant in contributing towards the maintenance of their households. However, beyond financial necessity, young women emphasised that they seek employment because otherwise they would get bored 'sitting at home'. This temporal dissatisfaction – described through narratives of boredom – emerged particularly following secondary education. In this chapter, I query the temporal dissatisfaction that young women associate with being at home. This query reveals the attractions of the reverse of 'sitting at home' – being in employment. For young women, the space of home was intrinsically attached to normative domesticity that they were keen to reject. Employment, on the other hand, offered them an opportunity to develop friendships, claim mobility in the city, and negotiate marriage and participation in housework. This chapter offers an overview of the *pleasures* associated with seeking distinction through employment, drawing attention to the differentials of class and gender in evaluations of socio-economic change.

The following chapter, Chapter 4, initiates an inquiry into the conditions of young women's entry into and participation in service employment. The new economy, as detailed in Chapter 1, requires workers to be equipped with new skills, such as, English speaking, computers, customer management, etc. Young women described their efforts to acquire these skills in order to prepare themselves for the job market, but they emphasised that they had done so without adequate resources and in the face of everyday struggle. As they moulded their 'habitus' to mediate belonging in the new economy, they credited their success in the job market to 'innate' aspects of their selves. These innate traits, which could range from an unusual interest in studies and good communication skills to charming looks and stubbornness, set them as *different* in their immediate environments. This chapter explores young women's consciousness of their 'lack' and its mitigation through the strategy of 'disidentification', highlighting the affective complexities of seeking distinction.

Continuing the inquiry into the costs of 'distinction', Chapter 5 explores the disjuncture between young women's expectations of and experiences in the service economy. Although young women fulfil the skills requirements of the service economy, even altering their bodily comportment, to gain jobs in cafés, call centres, malls, and offices, they are disappointed with the low-level work that they are recruited into in these workplaces. On the basis of their education, they vehemently reject domestic work that their mothers and other women in their neighbourhoods had been engaged in. However, service professions do not allow them a full escape from such stigmatised labour. Instead, young women are alert to managers' efforts to implicate them into tasks that resemble domestic work in their workplaces, such as, cleaning, washing, mopping, etc. This resistance, which often resulted in conflicts with managers, was instrumental to the maintenance of 'respectability' for young women. On the other hand, young women did not outrightly challenge other precarious conditions of work, including long working hours, with no rest breaks, and no overtime pay, enduring exhaustion and injuries. In this chapter, I explore how young women's experiences in the workplace reveal fractures in their attachment to employment as a form of distinction.

The final ethnographic chapter, Chapter 6, builds upon the previous chapters to discuss young women's exit from employment as a result of accrual of costs and injuries. During fieldwork, I observed young women quitting work, often impulsively, in response to

managers insulting them in front of other staff or customers, colleagues gossiping behind their back, or not being able to take time off. Young women explained these resignations as having had enough, just not wanting to do it anymore, or not feeling it any longer. While their income is important to their families, young women express limited attachment to their jobs, trading in one precarious job for another, moving across cafés, call centres, malls, and offices. As such, they do not set out to establish 'careers' in these fields, disrupting the narrative of women's 'aspirations' in the new economy. Instead, as this chapter highlights, they demonstrate ambivalence through simultaneous expression of disappointment with the conditions of employment and the will to continue being employed in the future.

The concluding chapter, Chapter 7, weaves the ethnographic findings with the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis. It discusses the emergence of women's employment in the new economy as a practice of class distinction with reference to young women's ambivalent engagements that the ethnographic chapters highlight. In this chapter, I assess the contributions and implications of understanding the process of 'seeking distinction' from the point of view of those in liminal positions, in interaction with conditions of socio-economic change. I conclude with 'updating' the ethnography with developments in some respondents' lives since 2017 and final reflection on the wider significance of this project.

CHAPTER 2

Methodology: Feminist Ethnography of Work

Image 2: A lane in Khanpur

The journey in retrospect

> "At the end of the voyage, if you are lucky, you catch a glimpse of a lighthouse, and you are grateful." (Behar, 1996, p.3, quoted in Gunaratnam and Hamilton, 2017, p. 2)

To narrate my methodology, I begin with the provocation that "methodology is always an in media res wandering, if not a bewildering getting lost, as well as a retrospective retelling" (Gunaratnam and Hamilton, 2017, p.2). Although methodology sections are usually intended to impart coherence to an otherwise confusing and challenging process, here I very deliberately convey some of the incoherence of my own fieldwork. Through 'vulnerable writing' (Page, 2017), I espouse feminist reflexive practice of highlighting the ethics and politics of knowledge production. I do so particularly through offering a challenge to the fetishisation of ethnographies. There has been ample criticism of ethnography for its baggage of colonialism, imperialism, and gendered politics of knowledge production, leading to changes in ethnographic practices. Indeed, ethnographers now lay bare their own vulnerabilities through reflections on "the economy of exchange" between the researcher and the researched (Skeggs, 2002, p. 6), 'revelatory moments' (Trigger, Forsey and Meurk, 2012), and 'ethnographic failures' (Visweswaran, 1994). However, ethnographic *narratives* are still characterised by progressive linearity of conducting the research, reflecting on the data, and developing insights. As such they do not capture the full extent of the tumultuous journey of ethnographic research, which involves not only difficulties in gaining access, developing relationships, sustaining contact, but also tensions inherent in decision making about the research direction to pursue. By exposing these difficulties and tensions, we can reflect on the complex relation between conducting research and producing knowledge. Through narrating my own methodological meanderings, I demonstrate the significant bearing of uncertainty and incoherence on the findings and conclusions of this research.

Early access

Ensconced in Cambridge in 2015, I proposed to conduct an ethnography with lower middle class women workers in Delhi to understand urban gender and class formations at the site of women's work. As the capital city, Delhi offers a sprawling urban landscape for the study of changing class and gender relations. In recent years, particularly following the gang rape of a young woman, Jyoti, in 2012, Delhi has also been the site of

extensive discourse on gender and class. Further, in Delhi, I had the advantage of shared language – Hindi – even though it was a city I was previously not intimate with, having grown up in the nearby town of Aligarh in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Recognising the challenges of setting out to research an ambiguous or 'liminal' class category – lower middle class – I began with attempts to identify appropriate sites. Unfamiliar with the city of Delhi, I decided to establish access in the neighbourhood of Khirki in South Delhi. Khirki Village or Khirki Extension (as the wider area is known) had been in news only a couple of years ago (2014) for the then Delhi law minister's midnight raid on home of Ugandan immigrants in the neighbourhood on suspicion of drug peddling and prostitution. Khirki Extension is a mixed neighbourhood – its residents include immigrants from Afghanistan, Uganda, Somalia, students and workers from north eastern states of India, as well as those who have resided there for generations. Khirki also occupies a prime spot in South Delhi, between Saket and Malaviya Nagar, opposite the gleaming and expansive Select Citywalk, Metropolitan, and DLF malls. Very much in contrast to its opposite door neighbours, the streets in Khirki are narrow and untidy. Yet, because of its prime location and relatively low property cost, it has become a popular spot for offices of arts and non-government organisations. As such, Khirki, like many other 'urban villages' of Delhi, is difficult to categorise; one could tenuously call it a middle class neighbourhood but even that category is disrupted by the presence of a large slum – Jagdamba camp – in the heart of the area. One of my earliest research contacts was Rama – a 24 year old fieldworker employed at a non-government organisation in Khirki. Rama is married and her daughter was one year old at the time. Rama's work entailed surveying households in Jagdamba camp, the slum in Khirki, and recruiting women for employability skills training offered by the non-government organisation she worked for in Khirki. I offered to help Rama in the office and on her field trips, sometimes taking notes for her, at other times keeping an eye on her daughter. While we did not have extended conversations with women who lived in the slum – most of them were working as domestic workers and did not have time to spare – the visits still helped me get a sense of the milieu. I eventually also attended the training session offered to women at the non-government organisation in Khirki (I discuss this session in Chapter 4).

Although it was relatively easy to gain initial access into Khirki through arts and non-government organisations, it became clear quite quickly that given its very mixed

composition and small-scale economy, the neighbourhood would not suffice for my study on gender, class, and labour. After failed attempts to gain access to a beauty parlour and a day care centre in Khirki, I decided to cast my net wider. Besides spending time with Rama in Khirki, I gained access to a cab company office in Kalkaji, also in South Delhi. I visited the cab company office in Kalkaji at lunch times once or twice a week, getting to know the women drivers, some of them married and with children. They often shared banter over lunch and were quick to implode at their managers. One particular discussion about their uniforms offered me important insights into working women's ideas of 'professionalism' and 'respectability' (I discuss this in Chapter 5). Perhaps the training session and this discussion about uniforms were 'revelatory moments' (Trigger, Forsey and Meurk, 2012) in my fieldwork; however, all the while, my quest for coherence continued. How do I explain my fieldwork with seemingly disparate groups of women to a colleague, a reader, an examiner?

It is then interesting that the group of women who offered the most coherence to my research was the one I did not actively seek. In early days of fieldwork between Khirki and Kalkaji, I found shelter in a café in Chittaranjan Park or CR Park (another neighbourhood in South Delhi, which was also my 'home' for a large part of the fieldwork), feeling at ease with my laptop and notebook. On my first day in the café, a young worker – Sheela – came up to me and said – "Ma'am, you're very nice, come again tomorrow." I could claim that a researcher is always in the process of 'research-in-the-city'[13] but in that moment, truly the 'subject' had found the researcher rather than the other way around. Through my regular visits to the café, I got to know Sheela and Prachi, both unmarried, thus offering me a different 'sample' as compared to the mostly married women I had been in touch with until then. Prachi shortly quit from the café and I hired her as my research assistant. After more than three months into fieldwork, I had a group to 'hang out' with – Prachi introduced me to some of her friends, who offered to put me in touch with some of their friends, thus snowballing my sample. Prachi, Sheela, and their friends – all between the ages of 19 and 23, unmarried – live in

[13] Although in the café, as I took refuge, I was not completely in my element as 'researcher-in-the-city', in other arenas, I had been playing this role. As I went about my daily activities – travelling in cabs, getting a hair cut in a beauty parlour, meeting a maid working for a friend's family – I actively sought and spoke with young women and men in Delhi. Informal conversation in these spaces made their way into my fieldnotes and have informed my analysis.

the neighbourhoods of Dakshinpuri and Khanpur in South Delhi. They were all working (currently employed or employed in the last six months at the time of fieldwork) in the private service sector across cafés, call centres, malls, and offices. Shortly before establishing my ethnographic 'group', I had gained access to literacy classes for young women run by a non-government organisation in Khanpur. Aradhna, a 30 year old, who ran these classes, also facilitated my access to some young women in the neighbourhood. Increasingly, my researcher's compass kept bringing me back to Khanpur and Dakshinpuri, where I ended up doing the bulk of my research, including interaction with women's families, skills training managers/providers, and some unemployed women. In the later stages of fieldwork, I interviewed some of the drivers I had made contact with. I also went to Sarita Vihar, Maidangarhi, and Badarpur, interviewing older married and unmarried women working as community workers for non-government organisations and as teachers.

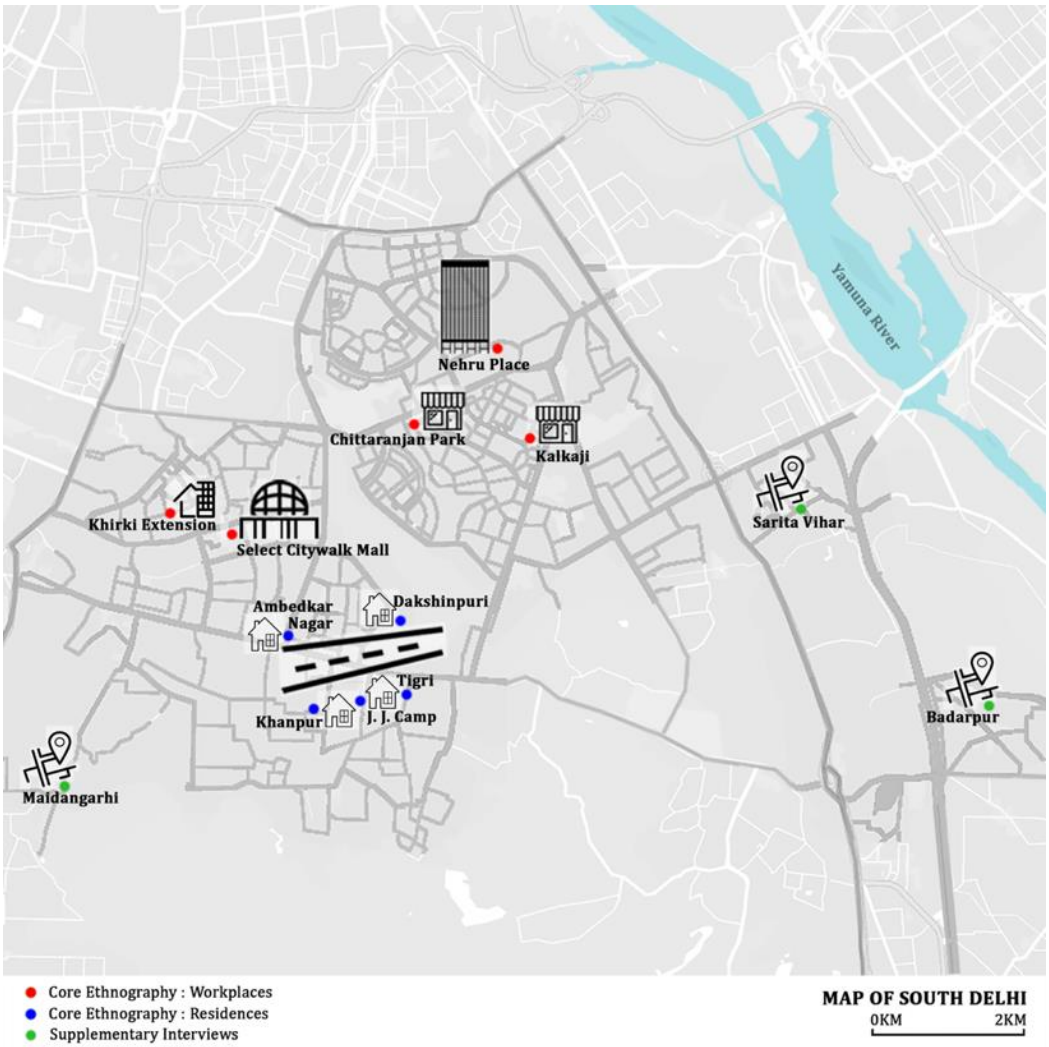

Image 3: Fieldwork map

It was only through the process of thesis writing that I decided to focus on the group of unmarried young women, resident in Khanpur and Dakshinpuri, working in cafés, call centres, malls, and offices, as my primary group. While many researchers have written about ethnographic failures – where prospective participants refused to be participants, where participants were not interested in talking about the subject of research, where it was simply impossible to gain access to participants for a range of factors, I am compelled by a different question – how does one portray the 'parallels' of an ethnography? In other words, what about the multiple efforts that researchers make to identify, contact, and develop relationships with participants, often at different sites, each of which could potentially lead to a different research outcome? The time I spent with Rama and Aradhna, cab drivers from different parts of Delhi, as well as non-government organisation workers and teachers, does not constitute 'ethnographic failure'. It is also not merely 'surplus' data that I would use at a later stage. Instead, as a 'researcher-in-the-city', I came to retrospectively craft my data in the form of concentric circles, whereby the ethnography with young unmarried women workers of Khanpur and Dakshinpuri, is at the core of this thesis. As the group I managed to collate most in-depth information about - through access to their workplaces, their families, and skills training centres in the neighbourhoods - these young women, in hindsight or the "insight that is always arriving too late" (Behar, 1996, p.3, quoted in Gunaratnam and Hamilton, 2017, p. 2), are my primary research participants. The next section details the profiles of these young women, and the settings and methods of my research with them. However, the outer rings of concentric circles – neighbouring narratives from women in other parts of South Delhi – constitute 'ethnographic parallels' that very much make their way into the analysis.

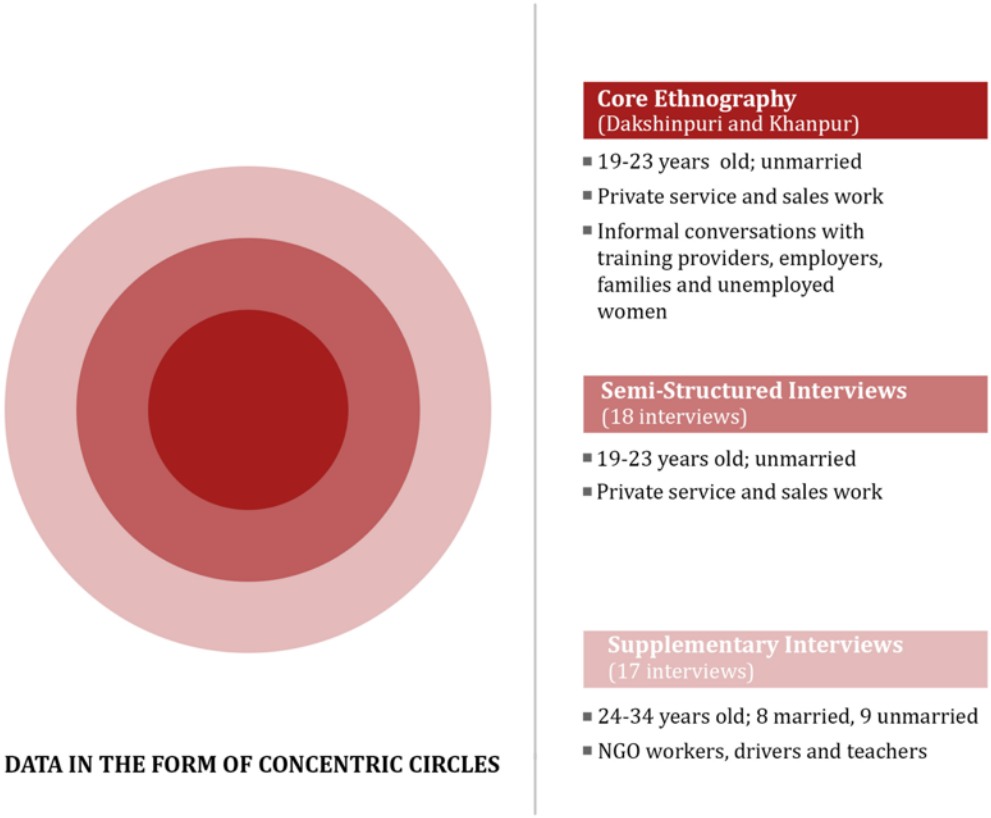

Image 4: Data in the form of concentric circles

Settings and participants

Khanpur and Dakshinpuri are adjacent neighbourhoods in South Delhi with hard-to-define borders and harder-to-define socio-economic profile. The defining landmark for Khanpur and Dakshinupri is an unused cinema hall called 'Virat'. This grey concrete structure is in a state of disrepair (my respondents did not remember it being in use during their lifetime) but its surrounding grounds are informally used for playing and hosting weddings, religious events, and festival celebrations. As I navigated autos to Virat to meet my respondents, this looming building increasingly seemed representative of these neighbourhoods – functioning despite lack of resources, attention, or concern. Although it is difficult to find a standard classificatory scheme for neighbourhoods in Delhi, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) categorises areas through property 'circle rates'. While property rates do not reflect the neighbourhoods' diverse population, economy, and place in social hierarchy, they may provide a partial sense of the economic value of an area. Khanpur and Dakshinpuri are classified as 'Category G'

neighbourhoods; the lowest value neighbourhoods are in 'Category H'[14]. With busy markets for vegetables and fruits, clothes and accessories, and household items, the narrow lanes of Khanpur and Dakshinpuri blend into one another. The clothes and accessories market selling 'fake' brands and export surplus for cheap prices, reminded me of the more middle class markets in Delhi – Sarojini Market, Lajpat Nagar – that I was previously familiar with. My respondents liked to frequent the 'Central Market' to buy jeans, dresses, shoes, jewellery, and make up, particularly as festival and wedding season or a party approached. In addition, an overlapping area – Tigri – was known among them for its cafés and Dominos pizza. Dotted with multinational fast food chains, small shops selling colourful *dupattas* or scarves, stalls of fake branded jeans, as well as roadside fruit and vegetable markets, Khanpur and Dakshinpuri's 'diverse economies' (Gibson-Graham, 2008) are representative of Delhi's urban villages (Datta, 2012; Govinda, 2013).

The diverse housing and residents, occupying space in the centre of the city, make it difficult to *class*ify Khanpur and Dakshinpuri. Most commonly, narrow but well-built streets are lined with two to three storey houses. Each floor usually comprises of a room, a kitchen, sometimes a bathroom, and is occupied by one family. These floors are rented out although a big family might also own the whole house, with the parents and sons' families taking up three floors. The difference in the socio-economic status of 'owning' versus 'renting' families is wide and known within the neighbourhoods. However, the gap between owners and tenants is further complicated with the *basti* or slum 'JJ Camp' located in Dakshinpuri. Slums in Delhi are not necessarily makeshift or temporary although they usually have lower and narrower streets, leading to water drainage issues. In slums typically, most families live in one bedroom units in houses split into flats, with shared toilets; sometimes kitchens might be set up along one wall of the room. Women who lived in the slum, regardless of ownership or tenancy, were reluctant to take not only me, a researcher with considerable class difference, but also their friends to their homes. My respondents naturally represented this variety of housing – most lived in rented one-bedroom flats with their families, some were resident in the slum JJ Camp, and very few were in houses owned by their families. While rich research on class in Britain has often been situated in working class council

[14] Categories of neighbourhoods have been accessed through Delhi MCD Circle Rates Finder.

estates (see, for example, McKenzie, 2015; Walkerdine, 2016), a similar approach that allows overlapping of residence and class was difficult to adopt in the context of this research, particularly due to its focus on a 'liminal' class category.

All of my respondents had grown up in Delhi, they were either born in Delhi or moved to Delhi with their parents when very young. As such, they are 'urban women' – in their narratives, they often distinguished between their ancestral villages and the city of Delhi in terms of level of familiarity and comfort. While the city was at times intimidating – women talked about how they did not know their way around outside of their neighbourhoods before they started working – the village was strange. They visit their parents' and grandparents' villages for special occasions (funerals, weddings, festivals), mostly in the states of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar. All of them identified as city girls with an urbane mentality and attitude. They commented on having to change their clothing when visiting the village, feeling ill at ease with the way of life in the village, and so on. They recognised how the requirement to change their bodily comportment according to spaces was specifically gendered. In confluence with having to wear 'traditional' clothes (rather than 'Western' clothes), they also commented on how women in the village do not have the same opportunities for education, employment, and mobility as them. Their 'urbanity' is also reflected through their employment in general and their occupations specifically, which do not exist or are at least not common in rural India. Employed across cafés, call centres, malls, and offices, these young women earned between Rs.8,000 and Rs.12,000 (GBP 80-120) per month, close to the minimum income threshold in Delhi.

They had all studied in Delhi, attaining primary and secondary education at government schools, although a few spoke about how they or their elder siblings used to go to private schools before their families started having financial *'problem'* (the English word 'problem' was used commonly to describe a turn of events that stripped the family of its financial resources, this often involved the father losing his job, which I discuss later in this section and further in Chapter 4). That private schools provide better quality education than government schools was an undisputed view, but fees was a prohibitive factor. These young women spoke fondly of their time spent in school, in full time education, particularly about the close friendships they formed at the time. All of them went to schools that were within walking distance from their homes, so it was common

for them to walk to and fro with friends. These friendships were, as such, also developed in the neighbourhoods they lived in, with their schools providing a space to spend time together away from home. This opportunity to spend the day with friends away from home changed with these young women finishing secondary school and going into higher education.

The decisions around pursuing higher education are quite interesting and go hand in hand with decisions about employment. Higher education is seen as important to get a good job, and more generally to do well in life or to attain social mobility. In a competitive job market, where class XII is the minimum qualification required for semi-skilled service jobs, it is not surprising that young women try to gain an edge by pursuing undergraduate, and at times postgraduate degrees. However, they almost always enrol in distance learning programmes, with classes held once a week on Sundays. There is very little deliberation about making this choice but the difference between 'regular' and 'open' education appeared regularly in their narratives. While pursuing a degree through distance learning allowed these women to get into work, often not even attending the weekly classes, they were aware that this was poorer quality of education, and that they had lost not just an academic learning environment but also a space where you inculcate friendships and networks. None of these young women had applied for 'regular' education at Delhi University, the main government undergraduate educational institution in the city, and were of the view that they would not have been accepted on account of low scores. It appeared more common for families to invest in private higher education for young men after secondary school if they could afford it, but it wasn't widely available as an option for women, especially since quite a few of these private colleges/universities are not in Delhi, but in nearby states.

These women then attempt to compensate for some of these shortcomings by taking short term courses at skills training centres (which I further discuss in Chapter 4). These courses are undertaken usually during periods of unemployment or prior to their first job; some of my respondents had found jobs, directly or indirectly, through such centres though on occasion they were disappointed that while they enrolled in a computer course, the job the centre put them forward for was not 'computer-related' work. Although the quality of education available to these young women is poor, it is significant that they are going on to become graduates, gaining educational capital that

enables their entry into service employment. In their narratives, they reflected on the newness of their educational capital, with their parents, particularly their mothers, having gained education only up to secondary school level, which meant they had little to no guidance when making decisions about education and employment.

Interestingly, in the neighbourhoods of Khanpur and Dakshinpuri, while women are making concerted efforts to gain education and employment, it is not uncommon for men of various ages to be unemployed. This is not to suggest that there are no unemployed women or employed men in these areas but that in the families of the young women who are in work, men – fathers, brothers, and husbands – are often unemployed or doing ad hoc work. The reasons for these men not being in work ranged from the company shutting down and work being unavailable to drinking and mental health problems. Women who have younger brothers expressed concern about them falling into wrong company and dropping out of school. They also spoke about the young men of Dakshinpuri and Khanpur who stand at street corners and harass women all day long, which was substantiated on my field visits to these areas. While statistics specific to this area are unavailable, these women's narratives suggested that their incomes are very important in their families. None of the women kept all of their income to themselves, it was usually handed over to the family and used in daily expenses, or on set expenses, such as younger siblings' education. These women's employment (and income) have different values and implications, depending on their family's financial situation, including the number of earning members, but through their narratives, the unique significance of their position – young women from liminal lower middle classes navigating necessity and aspiration – became apparent.

Studying women's work

This research was conducted through nine months of ethnography with young lower middle class women employed in service work in Delhi. The subject of this research – women's work in India – has largely been reliant on statistics and surveys. Economists and policy makers have been preoccupied with the low and declining female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) in recent years, primarily measured through the National Sample Survey (NSS) and the India Human Development Survey (IHDS). Although the low and declining female labour force participation rate in India is indeed of concern, there are several issues with the survey approach to women's work. First, it

is unclear whether and to what extent these surveys are able to take into account the substantial proportion of work in the informal economy.[15] Second, surveys rely on declarations of participation in work. Women and their families may not always necessarily see them as workers, for example, when helping on the farm or attending to a corner shop or even doing piece work.[16] Third, the representativeness of these surveys for cities as socially and economically complex as Delhi is questionable (Sudarshan and Bhattacharya, 2009). The absence of detailed data on neighbourhoods in Delhi makes it difficult to capture the nuances of women's participation even in the formal economy. While ethnographies do not necessarily provide a corrigendum to all of these issues, they can paint a more detailed and complex picture of women's work that at least reflects on the issues with the survey approach outlined above. Indeed, feminist research practice leans towards qualitative and ethnographic exploration as a means to address the inadequacy and biases of statistics and surveys (Platt, Crothers and Horgan, 2013).

In conducting an ethnography of women's work, I was compelled to be attentive to the particular ways in which women may perform work. This implied taking into account not only the gendered meanings and value of paid work but also women's involvement in and ideas of unpaid work and 'non-work'. Traditionally, the 'work' in ethnographies of work has been paid work. Ethnographers embed themselves alongside workers in workplaces, such as, in factories, shops, and offices, to understand conditions and politics of work through first-hand experience. This image of the 'researcher as worker' is evocative, even symbolic, of ethnographies of work. However, this approach relies on

[15] Women workers are more likely to be concentrated in the informal economy, particularly in "'invisible' areas of informal work, such as domestic labour, piece-rate homework, and assistance in small family enterprises, which offer precarious employment status, low, irregular or no remuneration…" (Chant and Pedwell, 2008, p. 1). This 'feminisation' of the informal economy may be due to a range of factors, including women's lack of access to the formal job market, women's lack of mobility, and the offer of 'flexibility' in informal work which allows women to simultaneously participate in both productive and reproductive labour.

[16] Although the National Sample Survey (NSS) provides historical and comprehensive data on employment and unemployment in the country, it has been noted that its definition of 'work' and method of data collection may lead to the exclusion of women (Sudarshan and Bhattacharya, 2008). The Indian Human Development Survey (IHDS), in recent years, has tried to adopt a more comprehensive approach. IHDS calculates labour force participation data based on questions about income (rather than relying on self-declaration of employment), taking into account all family members who participate in an income generating activity. They also measure employment over a longer period of time (at least 240 hours in the last year) as compared to the NSS (for further information, see - https://www.ihds.umd.edu/employment)

forced segregation between paid work and other forms of work that workers may be involved in. While there is something to be gained from an exclusive focus on paid work, we do need to attend to the question – what do we, as ethnographers, lose from such exclusions in the study of work? I began my fieldwork intending to adopt the classical ethnographic approach to the study of work by embedding myself in workplaces. Initial attempts to gain access to a beauty parlour and a day care centre in Khirki, as outlined earlier, failed. When I eventually found respondents through the café in Chittaranjan Park, I decided to frequent it as often as I could while still visiting the non-government organisation in Khirki and the cab office in Kalkaji. The time spent observing these workplaces was valuable not only for establishing a relationship with respondents but also for understanding the environment my respondents worked in. However, a few months into these observations, the limits of studying only the workplace became apparent; I outline these below.

Long standing feminist scholarship has demonstrated that women's work is hardly ever confined to paid work, the formal economy or public places for that matter. An overwhelming proportion of women's work, paid and unpaid, happens in the 'private' space of home, as Mies' (1982) excellent study of women lace markers in Narsapur deftly demonstrates. Working at home in their 'leisure' time, these women lace makers were not accounted for as 'workers' in surveys, even as they were entangled in a global industry. Further, women's decisions to participate in as well as experiences of employment are impacted upon by families and domestic concerns. In early conversations, young women told me about the various negotiations they entered into with their families when entering employment (discussed in Chapter 3). These negotiations – commonly including the location and timing of work – are indicative of class and gender anxieties. As lower middle class families, they could most probably 'get by' without these young women's incomes, but the additional income was also welcome as it assisted in maintaining their tenuous hold on middle class status (as discussed in Chapter 1). Of course, the possibility of doing away with women's incomes only arises because as women, they are not expected by default to enter paid work. Further, their participation in paid work can raise questions over the financial situation, the class, and thus, the respectability of families, even though this is, as I will show in the thesis, in a state of flux. Informed by these initial findings and inspired by scholarship that

examines women's work up-close (Mies, 1982; Weiss, 2002; Ong, 2010, among others), I concluded that study of gender and work requires extension beyond the workplace.

When Prachi left work from the café, she suggested that in the future we could meet in the Select Citywalk mall in Saket, South Delhi. I hired Prachi as my research assistant, offering her compensation for arranging and accompanying me for meetings. Prachi introduced me to her friends – Chandni, Chitra, Aarti – and her sisters – Anamika and Priya – at the mall. Over the next few months, I spent several Sundays meeting Prachi and some of her friends at the Select Citywalk mall, enjoying the winter sunshine outside, taking numerous selfies, and often going up to the food court for pizzas and burgers. The young women I met were either employed or had been employed in the last six months. Through my interactions with Prachi and others, a pattern started emerging – young women appeared not to stay in one job for very long, instead switching every few months from call centres to cafés to offices, with periods of unemployment in between. It should be noted that although these young women preferred to meet at the mall, their access to it was otherwise limited. That is, visits to the mall as a practice of leisure were not very common. When they did visit the mall, there was a sense of 'occasion' to it, the visit was not a simple 'hanging out', 'killing time' or 'timepass' (Mains, 2007; Musharbash, 2007; Jeffrey, 2010a). This is in contrast to various studies of unemployed young men, who may hang out on street corners, tea stalls, markets to spend their unstructured days (Mains, 2007; Jeffrey, 2010a) (discussed in Chapter 3). In the case of young women, it became clear through our conversations that they would come to the mall for special 'outings' – on a secret date with a boyfriend, to partake in Christmas and New Year's festivities, or more rarely for a family trip. Meeting me – the 'ma'am' or an upper middle class female researcher from abroad – then provided young women a reason to frequent the mall without their families raising too many questions. As I met more young women through other contacts, the mall transformed into a site of both leisure and work. Several of my respondents - Deepti, Jahanvi, Sarita, Richa, Neha, and later Priya - worked in cafés and shops in Select Citywalk and neighbouring malls.

The first phase of 'hanging out' with women in their workplaces (mostly cafés although I also visited Aarti in her telecoms office in Gurugram and Shalini in the shop she worked at in Nehru Place) when possible and in the Select Citywalk mall was crucial to

informing my understanding not only of their work, but also of their families and lifestyles. In the second phase, I conducted semi-structured interviews with all the initial respondents. The interviews posed open-ended questions (Appendix I), usually beginning with 'Tell me about yourself', and progressing to questions about families, work, and the future, to allow women the space to discuss issues that were important to them. Besides the initial respondents, I interviewed other young working women from Khanpur and Dakshinpuri, all unmarried, between the ages of 19 and 23, and employed in the private service sector. I conducted a total of 18 interviews, lasting an hour on an average. While I met some of these young women only once, I maintained contact with some of them over WhatsApp. These observations and interviews with young women were supplemented with meetings with managers of skills training centres and attendance at training sessions. Although invitations to their homes were not made often – either because young women were worried about their family's judgment of me or my judgement of their families and houses – I was warmly welcomed into Chandni's home several times, meeting both her parents. Jahanvi also invited me right away to visit her at home, whereas I went to Rama's and Aradhna's homes only towards the end of my fieldwork. In the final phase of fieldwork, as I continued to follow the lives of young women from Khanpur and Dakshinpuri, I carried out interviews with cab drivers and with women in Sarita Vihar, Badarpur, and Maidangarhi, employed as field or community workers and teachers. Of the 17 women I interviewed, between the ages of 24 and 34, 8 were married and 9 were unmarried. This set of women included Rama and Aradhna, two of my very early contacts, but I met the rest of the women only once.

My fieldwork was, as such, not 'located' in one field, but spanned several neighbourhoods, workplaces, as well as sites of leisure. What can this 'dislocated' ethnography offer us, particularly in terms of insights into work? While it is not unusual for ethnographers to have a convoluted path to establishing research contacts, gaining access, developing research relationships, my fieldwork raises questions broadly about the boundaries of ethnographies and more specifically about ethnographies of work. In thinking through these boundaries, I pay particular attention to the study of women's work and suggest that ethnographies of work interested in the question of gender require detraction from traditional ethnographic practices. This is particularly so because the salience of gender in relation to work emerges precisely in the blurring of divisions between paid and unpaid work, productive and reproductive work, and work

and other social mechanisms in general. This became a key finding of my fieldwork as I moved from workplaces to neighbourhoods (also see, Sen and Sengupta, 2016) to malls to keep up with my respondents who were in, in-between, *and* out of jobs. Even though ethnographies of women's work have been instrumental in challenging mainstream masculine notions of work, employment, and labour, they are often not necessarily recognised as ethnographies of work per se[17]. My 'dislocated' ethnography poses a challenge to this and proposes a more expansive approach to ethnography of work.

Analysis and ethics

My motivation to conduct this research through ethnographic methods was informed primarily by, as I outline above, the need to address the lack of attention to women's own narratives about their lives in the literature on women and work in India. It was also motivated by the scope that ethnographies can offer to respectfully and meaningfully understand lives that are not our own through an extended period of interaction. I drew upon my partial 'insider' position as a young Indian woman who speaks fluent Hindi to approach and introduce myself as a researcher to the respondents but I was also conscious that our affinity as 'women' was limited (Edwards, 1990; Devault and Gross, 2007). My early interactions with young women in cafés magnified the differences between us – I was a 'customer', while they were 'workers'. As our relationship developed over time, I attempted to minimise, but not render invisible, hierarchies of class between us. Importantly, I ensured honesty in our interactions. I always asked respondents when and where they preferred to meet, not least because this research was my full-time occupation whereas their time was constrained by both work and families. Although ethnographic 'success' often depends on the level of intimacy the researcher manages to establish with the respondents, I was aware that my respondents may not be entirely comfortable in inviting me to their homes (on the significance of domestic spaces to ethnographies of women, see Donner, 2012). I was similarly hesitant to host meetings at the flat I shared with my sister at the time, not wanting to highlight the class difference between us even further. Meeting in leisure

[17] This is exemplified in Smith's (2001) review of ethnographies of work, where due to spatial constraints she excludes "…ethnographic monographs that shed considerable light on work but focus primarily on other institutions and social processes such as family (Ong, 1987; Stacey, 1990; Wolf, 1992; Zavella, 1987)..." (p.20). It is not surprising that the ethnographies she refers to are all ethnographies of women's work. This is symptomatic of the general trend in scholarship to view research about women as 'specific' while research about men is generalisable to 'youth', 'culture', 'politics', and so on.

spaces – neither workplaces nor homes – then provided an avenue to craft our 'selves', and thus, negotiate the power dynamics between us to a certain extent. Further, I promised anonymity to all respondents and provided consent forms (Appendix II) to all the interviewees. The names of all respondents, workplaces, and training centres have been duly anonymised in the thesis.

Interestingly, the salient feature of difference between us – class – was also the subject of this research. In establishing their 'distinction' from working class or poor people and middle class or 'hi-fi' people, some respondents pointed to me as an example of an obviously 'high class' person. Most of them based this on my general appearance, the way I talked, and my status as an Indian woman studying and living 'abroad'. One respondent pointedly asked if my sister and I employed a maid to cook and clean for us in our flat in Delhi (which we did). This classification based on my 'habitus' elicited reflection on markers of class as well as challenged my previous self-identification as 'middle class'. In conducting this research, I did not assume the role of a detached sociologist who can gain knowledge from the outside. Instead, I engage with my respondents' analyses of their own lives, recognising the unique significance of their standpoint (Sosulski, Buchanan and Donnell, 2010). As neophyte workers in service professions, young women have a critical view of the requirements of the new economy as well as recognition of their own 'lack' in meeting these requirements. I, therefore, adopt the method of 'feminist narrative analysis' that "presents the respondents' own perspectives, assuming that they are the authority on what has happened in their lives" (Sosulski, Buchanan and Donnell, 2010, p. 39). As such, I do not establish a false dichotomy between 'narratives' and 'experiences', 'stories' and 'truth', or 'fiction' and 'fact' (Visweswaran, 1994). This is not to suggest that I do not partake in interpretation of young women's lives. Instead, I believe that my training in sociology is useful in developing micro/macro links (Burawoy *et al.*, 2000) between young women's individual lives and social, economic, and cultural structures. The chapter headings and sub-headings are drawn directly from young women's narratives as a way to reiterate that the thesis is led by them. Through our repeated interactions, which continued beyond the 'official' end of fieldwork, I was able to share the themes I developed for the four main chapters of the thesis with some of the respondents. They did not contest the themes and our discussions added nuance to the way I (re)present their narratives in the thesis.

Our interactions and interviews were conducted primarily in Hindi, with some respondents using English words and phrases infrequently. I translated and transcribed all the interviews myself. I decided to retain control over the transcripts in order to accurately translate the *language of work* that I had learnt through our interactions over an extended period of time. The previous chapter discusses the differences between 'work', 'employment', and 'labour'. Beyond these, there were a range of terms in circulation that the respondents used in their narratives. For example, 'company' work referred to work in factories, usually making small machinery parts; 'labour type' work implied manual labour; while 'job' mostly indicated new service work (but not traditional service work, such as domestic work). Being able to comprehend and represent the complex meanings and use of these terms is not simply a matter of fluency in Hindi and English (which I had from the start) but of developing an "understanding of the way language is tied to local realities, to literary forms and to changing identities" (Simon, 1996, p.138; quoted in Kim, 2012, p. 139). In an effort to convey such complexities, I retained all the English terms and some Hindi terms that respondents used; these are italicised and underlined in transcriptions. The choice to retain some Hindi terms is based on my 'researcher's sense' of their translatability and untranslatability into English and their significance in the local economy of discourses. Of course, translating this research into English to present to predominantly UK-based audiences "involves a complex level of concern with representation, power relation, and the reflexivity due to the special relationships among the researcher, the researched, and the potential readers" (Kim, 2012, p.132). Adopting a reflexive approach towards translation does not mitigate these issues, instead it highlights them with a view to engage the reader in a conversation about the politics of the production of global research in English language.

This chapter summarises my methodological and analytical approaches and dilemmas. It describes my early forays into fieldwork, the unintended or only partly intended directions I took during fieldwork, as well as the process of retrospective retelling of fieldwork. These discussions provide suitable ground for proposing modifications to conventional ethnographies of work from a feminist perspective. A feminist ethnography of work, I suggest, cannot be limited to workplaces but needs to encompass 'labouring lives' of women to understand their multiple forms of labour that interact with and impact their employment. The chapter further elucidates the lives of

the respondents who form my core 'ethnographic group' – young unmarried women, between the ages of 19 and 23, employed in private service work across cafés, call centres, shopping malls, and offices. Finally, I express some ethical concerns in (re)presenting narrative analysis in this thesis in order to alert the reader to the process I have undertaken to ensure, on my part, full justice to the respondents' narratives. The following four chapters discuss the findings of this ethnographic research.

CHAPTER 3

‘I get bored sitting at home’: Temporalities

Image 5: Delhi metro construction site

Introduction

I visited Aarti in her office in the sprawling glass and concrete building of *Motocel*, a telecoms company, on a Saturday. Aarti got me a visitor's badge and escorted me upstairs to the stationery room, where she worked, partly at the front-desk issuing stationery to company employees, and partly sorting orders and deliveries in the back room. Her salary, at Rs.8000 per month (GBP 80), was low and her travel to and from the office, which was based in Gurugram, a satellite city of Delhi, was long and arduous. Since it was Saturday, officially not a working day, Aarti and I could have the back space – neatly stacked from ceiling to floor with files, reams of paper, ballpoint pens, staplers, etc. – mostly to ourselves. Aarti told me about the jobs she had done before – as a web design assistant at a big company and as a data entry executive in a small office that printed business cards. Coming to discussion about her current job, Aarti told me in hushed tones, while her manager was next door, that she had been thinking about quitting it. She said she had even written her resignation letter a few days ago, but she did not want to hand it in until she had another job because she did not want to stay at home. She explained –

> "… once you get used to a job, you don't feel like leaving it. You can't just be at home, you don't enjoy it, you feel like going out…Even on Sunday, I can't stay at home. It gets really *boring* if you stay at home**,** I was home for one or two months and got really *bore* [sic]. My *life* became *boring*."

Aarti strikingly described the boredom that she had experienced in the intermittent period between jobs as all-encompassing – "My life became boring." Her big office was nearly empty on the day I visited and Aarti did not seem to have many tasks to do, yet she insisted that she would rather be at work than at home. Telling me about a friend, who she had previously worked with in the data entry job and who was now unemployed because her brother had refused her permission to work, Aarti said – "But now she's not happy at home, *obviously, ghar pe man nahi lagta,* nobody can be happy at home." True to Aarti's proclamation – "Even on Sunday, I can't stay at home" – we had previously met on a Sunday at a shopping mall, where she had come with friends to spend time on her only non-office day.

In this chapter, I explore young women's motivation to *seek* employment. Similar to Aarti's articulation of engulfing boredom when she was unemployed, respondents

reflected on feelings of stillness, slowness, worthlessness, and frustration from 'sitting at home' (literal translation). In response to my questions – 'Why/How did you first start working?' and 'Do you like your job? Do you want to continue doing it?' – they emphasised that although their families' financial vulnerabilities were a factor, they sought employment because otherwise they would get 'bored' sitting at home. I suggest that these young women's temporal dissatisfaction in the space of home is a reflection of, to use another temporal metaphor, *changing times*. Growing up in the post-1990 context, these young women are implicated in discourses of opportunity, productivity, and progress and, therefore, posit employment as the *proper* use of time. In doing so, their narratives are not significantly different from the temporal articulations of young men in similar contexts who attach worth and validation to employment (Mains, 2007; Jeffrey, 2010a). However, I further unpack young women's boredom to reveal the value that they attach to employment as an alternative to prevailing gendered norms.

The importance of temporal experiences in understanding social life has long been recognised by sociologists (Gell, 1992; Nowotny, 1992). 'Social time' is distinct from 'natural' or 'biological' time in that it challenges a singular, linear, factual understanding of time (Adam, 1990, 1995) on the premise that – "…time is fundamentally embedded in the social forms of life which constitute it and which are simultaneously constituted by it" (Adam, 1990, p. 42). However, as Bourdieu (2000) suggests, while we routinely use the language of time, our *awareness* of time only emerges when the link between the "expectations and the world which is there to fulfil them…is broken" (p.208). Based on this understanding, scholars have identified temporal disruption as a particular feature of unemployment and underemployment, expressed through the narratives of boredom (Jervis, Spicer and Manson, 2003; Mains, 2007; Schielke, 2008), waiting (Auyero, 2012; Ozoliņa-Fitzgerald, 2016), killing time or 'timepass' (Musharbash, 2007; Jeffrey, 2010a, 2010b). However, this emerging scholarship on temporalities and socio-economic change is predominantly either based on experiences of men or inattentive to the significance of gender in understanding temporalities.

In this chapter, I address this gap by exploring lower middle class women's position as 'in-between' the neoliberal valuation of productivity and employment, on the one hand, and the maintenance of social norms of gender, on the other hand. While scholars exploring temporal disruption and unemployment preclude women's experiences of

boredom on the premise that their involvement in unpaid domestic and care work implies that they have no free time (Mains, 2007; Schielke, 2008), my findings suggest that women's temporal dissatisfaction emerges precisely *through* the compulsion to domesticity. The respondents premised their desire for employment on their education. With higher educational qualifications than their parents, they asserted – 'We didn't study to sit at home!' Education, therefore, emerges as key in shifting their life expectations but the "world which is there to fulfil them" (Bourdieu, 2000, p.208) falls short. Many respondents described their parents' reluctance to allow them to work and further elucidated on work as a way to escape (however briefly) compulsion to conform to social norms of gender. The boredom, in their narratives, then emerged through pressure to participate in housework and to get married as well as restrictions on mobility and friendships. As such, in expressing boredom, these young women attach value to employment beyond financial necessity as a way of resisting implication into domesticity.

The chapter is structured as follows – I first explore shifts in women's life expectations and negotiations with their families to enter work, drawing attention to temporal articulations. In particular, I consider their association of boredom with 'sitting at home'. The first section contributes to nuancing the conceptualisation of boredom or temporal disruption through the lens of gender and class. The following two sections explore the experiences young women associated with staying at home and with employment. While 'home' implied pressure to participate in housework and marriage, employment offered opportunities for friendships, mobility, and consumption. In these sections, I discuss how young women positioned employment as an *antidote to boredom*, thereby, espousing work time as *their* time. The chapter examines changing attitudes towards women's work, as expressed through changing temporalities among young lower middle class women.

'But what will I do sitting at home': Boredom, gender, and class

> Me: "What time do you leave in the morning [for work]?"
>
> Aarti: "I leave by 7.40 am to reach here for 9 am. See, I reach home at 9.30 pm, I'm going to take a shower, freshen up, have dinner, etc. I have to wake up at 5-6 am. So I don't have time for *chatting* [with boyfriend]. I have time on Sunday, but my net [internet] is over by Saturday evening."

Me: "So your parents don't have a problem with you coming back home so late?"

Aarti: "Yeah, they do. *Mummy* says you get so tired. *Papa* doesn't know I come so *late* (laughs). When I enter the house, he's about to come back. He doesn't know I come so *late*. I just get changed. If he knew, he would make me quit my job. It's different with *mummy*, different with *papa*."

Aarti travelled every day in shared cabs to Gurugram where her office was based. On the day I visited her, she told me it was even more difficult to find these shared cabs on Saturday. Her commute to and from the office was dependent on the scheduling of shared cabs, which meant that even if she wanted to leave early on a particular day, she could not. Of course, there were alternatives to shared cabs – buses and metro – but for a range of reasons, cabs were the most economical way for Aarti to travel (I discuss travel and exhaustion in Chapter 5). She usually managed to find a cab back around 7.30 pm, reaching home around 9.30 pm, something that her father was unaware of. If her father knew, Aarti said she would not be allowed to work. For most respondents, entering employment was not a straightforward matter – it had to be negotiated with parents, particularly with fathers (and in the case of married women, with husbands). Many young women, although initially not allowed, were persistent in their efforts to seek permission for employment. Jahanvi, whose parents worked together, setting up a daily stall for ironing clothes, said her father did not want her to enter café work –

"Then I told my father I had found a job…My father said you can't go, you've never done this before. I cried a lot and stopped eating food, I told Niharika [best friend]. He just kept saying nobody has ever done this before, how will you even go there. Then mummy and others got him around. Downstairs I had to get my brother on my side too."

As was the case with Jahanvi, parents were often unsure about the kind of work their daughters would be involved in, given that the spaces they are entering are relatively recent (one only needs to be reminded that Select Citywalk mall, where many of my respondents worked, was opened only in 2007) and out-of-reach for lower middle class consumers[18]. At times, employers intervened to convince families to allow women to

[18] Many of my respondents told me that their mothers had never been to Select Citywalk mall. While malls are public spaces, they are not equally accessible to all. For these young women's families, an occasional trip to the mall can be described better as 'tourism' rather than 'consumption'. Even when young women

work. This was particularly the case with non-government organisations, but it was also not unheard of even among large multinationals[19]. Further, in order to enter employment, women had to ensure that it was temporally bound, not in terms of the number of days they worked (it was common for young women to work six and sometimes even seven days a week) but in terms of the start and finish times. The timings of work were significant in making decisions about employment and very early start or late finish was viewed with suspicion. Sarita, who worked in the same café as Jahanvi, said her mother did not have an issue with her seeking employment since her salary helped them out with expenses. However, her father sometimes commented, inquiring about the nature of her work –

> Me: "Does your father say anything about you working?"
>
> Sarita: "No, *papa* doesn't bother so much…Sometimes he says, like when I do *overtime*, what kind of *job* do you do…Recently there was an *order*, so we had to come here at 6 am, in the dark, Jahanvi came too, and another guy. He picked us up from home. So yeah he said, what kind of *job* do you do, you have to go so early."

Where parents did not question young women's employment, other people in the neighbourhood and the community scrutinised women's movements. Although Ranjini lived in Delhi with her family, their extended family in her father's village raised apprehensions about her employment –

> "When I go to the village, people talk…they say they send their daughter to work…They feel jealous too. There was an *aunty* who used to say they send their daughter to work, she leaves in the morning, comes back at night, what kind of *job* is this…I said what do you know, do you go…I used to go for *coaching* in the morning to *Pehel* [a skills training centre], from there I went straight to my job

went to the mall on 'dates' with their boyfriends, they usually saved up money beforehand to buy food to share in the food court.

[19] An article in the Wall Street Journal, *Fast-Food Chains in India Cultivate Untapped Workforce: Women*, December 2016, noted how fast-food chains, in their enthusiasm to employ the 'untapped' female workforce, are doing so by arranging visits for parents to workplaces. This is interesting to note in terms of considering motivations of multinational fast food chains in employing women. While the article does not explore that, instead focusing on how American fast-food chains have "become an unlikely source of female employment and empowerment in India, a country where traditionally most women are kept from working outside the home", there is indeed no dearth of scholarship that critiques the 'empowerment' narrative to show how women have become cheap and docile labour in global capital chains (see, for example, the classic treatise on globalisation and gender by Mies, 1986).

around 12-1 pm. 1 pm because I'd get free from *Pehel* at 12 pm. So I finished work by 9-9.30 pm, I reached home by 10-10.30 pm. People used to talk, they said jobs are usually 8 hours, I said, do you come and check? I don't think it's necessary for me to inform you, my *mummy papa* spend money and send me, if they don't have a *problem*, I don't care about other people."

Both Sarita's father and Ranjini's aunty raised the same question – what *kind* of job do you do – based on the timings of their work. Whilst not explicitly framed so, these questions recall anxieties over the 'promiscuous working woman', who is both a "site and source of contamination" (Patel, 2010, p. 4) (also see, Ong, 2010, pp. 179–194). Patel (2010) points out through her study of women call centre workers that "As global customer service workers, women must now traverse the nightscape" and, therefore, negotiate judgment, disdain, and violence as women 'out of place' (p.4). Similarly, among workers in a small-town BPO (business process outsourcing) centre in India, Vijaykumar (2013) finds that young women feel the need to distance themselves from both "old-fashioned housewives and promiscuous urban call center girls" (p.778). Among my respondents' communities, suspicions about women's employment may as such also be particular in terms of their metropolitan location, whereby the city, in itself, is 'polluting'[20]. Strikingly, despite such suspicions, judgments, and often altercations, young women insisted on their desire for employment. Jahanvi even stopped eating in protest when her father refused her permission to go out for work. It should be noted that although they detached their desire for employment from their families' financial necessity, the contribution of their income to providing stability to their families was always in the background (I discuss relations of interdependence in detail in Chapter 6). Indeed, this intensified *desire* for employment has emerged in a changing and precarious socio-economic context where multiple incomes may be required to bolster everyday sustenance.

As young women take up opportunities in the new service economy and provide stability to their families, they negotiate changing attitudes towards women's work.

[20] In Derné's (1994) study, which explores the motivations of upper caste, upper class Hindu men in Benares, India in maintaining male dominance, one respondent offered this insight regarding intensified control on women in urban areas – "Perhaps concerned…with women of their class increasingly working, with the loss of community control in cities…men control their wives' aspirations by restricting their actions outside the home" (p.213).

Rama, who I met early on in my fieldwork, worked for a non-government organisation. She used to bring her one year old daughter with her to work every day and although this was no easy task, with travel of one and half hours each way, Rama insisted that she has always wanted to do *something* with her life. Her husband had initially been reluctant but she pointed out that with a growing family, they could not survive on just his income –

> "I said to him, you know there's a problem, we can't survive on your income, we'll starve because of your pride. Then he went and saw where I work…They think it's the same atmosphere everywhere. He works in the *company line* [in a factory], so he would have seen *ladies* there, so he probably thinks that way…"

Interestingly, Rama commented on how the work her husband was familiar with – factory work – might be seen as unsuitable for women, but once he saw the kind of work she was doing (as a community worker for a non-government organisation), he was more accepting of her employment. Rama then added – "I've always been involved in work, I don't like sitting at home…I always need something." At home, Rama said to me, one starts feeling ill – headache, stomach ache, nervousness. She said her father used to get annoyed with her for roaming around but that is how she has always been. She had completed Bachelor's in Social Work while working and was at the time enrolled for a Master's in Social Work, hoping to go on to do a PhD in the future. And yet, when I asked Rama about her mother's occupation, she replied, "In our family, everyone is in *government service*. So nobody [that is, women] needs to go out," reproducing Papanek's (1979) observation that "…men in many societies boast that 'my wife doesn't have to work' when they want to demonstrate middle-class status" (p.779). By taking pride in telling me that women from her family never had to go out to work, and at the same time emphasising that she cannot bear to sit at home whilst also highlighting their household's financial vulnerabilities, Rama exposes the shifts in the terrains of 'distinction' from women being home bound (Oakley, 1974a; Papanek, 1979) to women being involved in the opportunities offered by the emerging service economy. Similarly, Prachi, who had quit her café job because she thought it was long hours, little pay, and the manager was disrespectful, continued her search for jobs throughout my fieldwork. Beyond her family's reliance on her income for stability, Prachi insisted that she cannot sit at home –

Me: "So are you still looking for jobs?"

Prachi: "Yes, I'm looking…my *family* doesn't have many *contacts*…So I've always looked for *jobs* myself. My *family* expects to help out with the *problems* at home and I want to do it too. I can't sit at home either. When you're at work, sometimes you want a day off. But when you don't have work, you want to go. It feels a bit like *school*, like how you'd cry for a holiday, now I cry for work."

In their semi-skilled service jobs, young women were busy – most of them had early starts, leaving home between 7 am and 8 am and returning in the evening between 6.30 pm and 8.30 pm. With busy schedules and limited time off (that made conducting this fieldwork difficult too), boredom did not appear as part of these women's descriptions of work, rather exhaustion was a common refrain (Chapter 5 delves into exhaustion and injuries as the 'costs' of precarious employment). Instead, boredom appeared almost always in conjunction with the idea of 'sitting at home'. To be precise, they used the English words 'bore' and 'boring' in conversations in Hindi, 'bored' was rarely used and only as part of an English sentence, 'boredom' was never used. Jeffrey (2010a) notes with reference to the narrative of 'timepass' or whiling away time among young unemployed men in Meerut, India that, "The very word 'timepass' because it is derived from 'pastime', suggested some familiarity with English, and by extension, connoted separation from working-class life" (p.97) (also see, Musharbash, 2007, on 'postcolonial temporalities'). For young women, usage of the vocabulary of boredom – bore and boring – also suggests distancing from necessity, not only because it indicates some degree of English fluency (although to a large extent the words 'bore' and 'boring' are incorporated into everyday conversational Hindi, see Fuller, 2011) but also because they contrasted their service work to needs-driven domestic work or factory work that their parents may have done.

It is then worth deliberating on the *specificity* of the social location of young women's boredom. The respondents for this study were either born in or moved when very young to Delhi; they often emphasised their belonging in Delhi, expressing a sense of disconnect from their parents' villages. For example, when I asked Aarti, whose account I opened this chapter with, where her family comes from, she told me – "Yeah, I've never been out of Delhi. My parents are from somewhere, they tell me, but I always forget (laughs)." Aarti's removal of herself from her parents' villages was expressed as

amnesia – in the metropolis of Delhi, she is very distant from rural life. Similarly, when I asked Sarita about her parents' villages, she said, "I can't remember the names. My childhood was in the village but other than that I've always been in Delhi. I don't go to the village. Mummy goes, and my siblings do too, but I don't." Other respondents highlighted the urban/rural distinction in more general terms – both Prachi and Chandni told me on separate occasions that they are not '*dehaati'* (villagers or 'village type'), distinguishing themselves on the basis of education and attitudes towards women's education, employment, and freedom. Prachi's allegation that in the villages, women do not study beyond class VIII is not entirely unfounded. My respondents' high level of education – at least to class XII and very commonly to undergraduate level – is a specifically urban phenomenon. The National Sample Survey (71st round, 2014) recorded that in rural areas, 4.5 per cent of males and 2.2 per cent of females were educated to graduation level and above, while in urban areas, the same level of education was undertaken by 17 per cent of males and 13 per cent of females (*Key Indicators of Social Consumption in India: Education*, 2015, p. 10).

These young women's boredom then emerged in close relation to their education, whereby they often retorted – 'We didn't study to sit at home!' All of my respondents had been in full-time education up to class XII (equivalent to pre-university level). The only exceptions to this educational level were some of the married women I conducted supplementary interviews with, who were married when very young. Class XII emerged as a critical juncture in these women's lives – after completing class XII, they lost the everyday routine of going to school, attending classes, hanging out with friends. While many of them went on to pursue higher education, this was commonly through distance learning programmes. With classes scheduled only once a week, there was a loss of educational and social space for these women beyond class XII. They responded to this either by enrolling for skills education at nearby training centres or looking for jobs (and often both). Most of them started working very soon after clearing class XII exams. In the words of Lovely (one of my supplementary interviewees), moderator for a market research company, "After XII, you feel something on the inside, you want to work, you want to go out. People can't sit with nothing to do. I definitely can't just do nothing, I definitely can't stay at home." The 'nothingness' or having nothing to do at home was reiterated by several respondents even when they were not satisfied with

work. Deepti, a 21 year old employed at *Espresso*, a multinational café chain, complained about her manager but said she did not want to leave before finding another job –

> Me: "You want to continue here?"
>
> Deepti: "I've thought so many times, there have been such situations, that I won't come from tomorrow. But then I'm just going to sit at home."
>
> Prachi: "Like what situations?"
>
> Deepti: "Like when you get told off for no mistake of yours. Or when they tell me off in front of other people. We can't react to that, I get angry. Then I think I should quit, there's no respect, no value for my work, so what's the point. But then I can quit, it doesn't impact him [the manager] any way, he'll find more staff. But what will I do just sitting at home? If I have another job, I can still think of quitting…"

Deepti recognised the vulnerability of her situation – in a competitive job market, she was aware that the manager would be able to find another worker quickly but she might not be able to find another job immediately (I discuss the implications of unemployment in Chapter 6). She would not have *anything to do* if she did not have a job. Although this was not the case – women did not lack things to do if they were not employed, as we will see in the next section on housework – they classified the space of 'home' as temporally slow and even still. The quest to continue working was strong among these young women, as Sheela, who worked for *Cuppa n Cake*, an Indian café chain, notes –

> "Yes, now I like it…I'll continue here because I'm unable to get out of it. If I leave this, I'll have to sit at home. If I change jobs, I want an *office job*, where I can work on a *computer*. More importantly, I want to continue working. This is why I don't want to leave this job…it feels good."

Diverse ethnographies by Jervis, Spicer and Manson (2003) in an American Indian reservation in the US, Mains (2007) in urban Ethiopia, Jeffrey (2010a, 2010b) in small-town Meerut, India elaborate on the connections between underemployment/ unemployment and disrupted temporalities. Strikingly, it is primarily young men's experiences that frame these connections. Jervis, Spicer and Manson (2003) note boredom among both men and women in the life on the 'rez' but comment that "Especially by young men, boredom was often attributed to the lack of jobs on the

reservation" (p.45). Both Mains (2007) and Jeffrey (2010a, 2010b) highlight the discrepancies between expectations among and chances for young men in the context of neoliberal economic change in urban areas of Ethiopia and India, respectively. While structural adjustment programmes have offered an imagination of modernisation and progress, young men are facing uncertainties of employment, and thus their futures, in these settings. Unemployment among young men may create dissonance because of failure to fulfil the normative breadwinner role, and thus inability to affirm masculinity. In his study of 'timepass', Jeffrey (2010a) explores a sense of ennui, disenchantment, and hopelessness among young lower middle class men enrolled in Meerut College at the 'crossroads' of childhood and adulthood. Similarly, Mains (2007) analyses the discourses of boredom and shame among urban young men in Ethiopia who have finished school but have not managed to secure 'respectable' employment. Mains (2007) finds –

> "For these young men, school was the last structured activity they were involved in. One way school differs from unemployment is that it simply makes a person very busy and, therefore, eliminates the problem of passing excessive amounts of time." (p.665)

This suggests that boredom may be a social experience that emerges in the disjuncture between these phases of life in the specific context of limited economic opportunities. In other words, 'young adults' or youth who are unable to transition to 'proper' adulthood by finding a job, getting married, and starting a family may experience such despair or weariness. However, in my research, while ending full time education and seeking employment emerged as a critical juncture, it was not premised on being able to satisfy the temporal trajectory of marriage and family. Indeed, as I will discuss in the following sections, young women's narratives of boredom implied resistance to marriage and families. Interestingly, even some of the older married women, including those with children, who I conducted supplementary interviews with, also expressed a sense of boredom from 'sitting at home'. Sushma, a 29 year old cab driver with two young children, said she enjoyed her work because "…it's not *boring*, like just sitting at home." Further, she noted about her sister, who incidentally took care of her children when she was away working –

> "My eldest sister, her husband is a dentist. She says she gets really *bore* [sic], she just stays at home, looks after children. I told her there's some burden inside you

because you're not doing anything, you should do something. We've been put into this world to do something."

Therefore, detracting from analysis that suggests that underemployment and unemployment cause temporal disruption by interrupting the trajectory to adulthood, I focus on these young women's boredom in relation to the need to define subjectivities through work in a rapidly changing socio-economic context (Dyson, 2008). With higher education than the previous generation and implication in the neoliberal discourse of productivity through employment, young women experience shifts in their life expectations. For young women, 'sitting at home', a phrase they used almost synonymously with 'bore' and 'boring', described waste, slowing down, and pausing of time. Ascribing boredom to home, young women then sought alternative ways of being, or alternative subjectivities, in consonance with the argument that boredom emerges through "the capacity to aim for more and to become aware that there is an alternative to the monotony" (Schielke, 2008, p. 257) (also see, Barbalet, 1999; Jervis, Spicer and Manson, 2003). However, at the same time, it should be noted that young women's engagement with employment is not necessarily motivated by the desire to build long-term 'careers' (Chapter 6 highlights the differences between short-term jobs and long-term careers for young women). Fleming (2018) finds that young unmarried women workers in information technology (IT) in Bangalore, India, referred to their employment as 'timepass', "…a way of referring to non-productive time, in that one is trying to avoid boredom rather than accomplish something" (p.89). For the respondents of this research, I suggest the narrative of boredom is a way to navigate their liminal position as lower middle class women, framed in-between the competing discourses of necessity and aspiration. While boredom, as Spacks (1995) suggests "offers an overwhelmingly rich subject for investigation" (p.11), it remains underexplored, particularly as part of women's experiences. In the following section, I explore the experiences associated with temporal suspension (to borrow from Baraitser, 2017) of the space of home in young women's narratives. These included pressure to participate in housework and get married as well as restrictions on mobility and friendships. This is not to suggest that employment provided young women a 'way out' of these experiences but that it offered an alternative to the temporally suspended or 'boring' space of home.

'I'm not a housewife, I'm working': Housework and marriage

> Me: "What time does she [your mother] leave [from home]?"
>
> Sheela: "Around 7.30-8 am, she comes back in the evening. She's usually there when I reach home."
>
> Me: "Who does all the housework then?"
>
> Sheela: "*Mummy* wakes up early to do it. I don't do it (laughs). *Mummy* keeps telling me to, she says ever since I started this *job*, I've become like a queen. I don't like doing work at home…"

One day when I went to see Sheela at *Cuppa n Cake*, she excitedly showed me the new phone she had bought. Although she usually did not keep her salary to herself, she had managed to save enough money to buy a smartphone. As I admired the display on her new phone, Sheela told me that they have had 'problems' in the family for a long time, which is why she could not even pursue studies beyond class XII (unlike most other respondents who were enrolled in undergraduate degree programmes through correspondence). Her father had dropped out of work a few years ago and her mother, who until that point had been a housewife, had started working as a domestic worker. Sheela's mother left around the same time as her in the morning to work in several houses and usually came back before she returned. With both Sheela and her mother working outside the home, I became curious about who does the housework. Sheela laughed and told me her mother does all of it because she does not like doing it. She extended her dislike of housework to home – "I can't sit at home, even on my days off, I go to Madangir [market] with my friend…" As we engaged in this conversation about housework, the 'housekeeper' (cleaner) in the café, a man Sheela disliked, interrupted to say – "*Madam,* you will have to do it after you get married anyway." He pointed out to Sheela that she is not from a big family to be able to afford servants and the man she gets married to might not even want her to work. Sheela became visibly annoyed with his interjection and retorted that she stays away from people with this sort of thinking – "I don't even talk to people who think like this." The housekeeper advised her to give up her *'badi soch'* or 'high thinking'; Sheela glared at him and then simply told me – "He's spoiled my *mood*."

In their resistance to 'sitting at home', young women emphasised and took pride in their dislike of and ineptitude towards housework. Deepti, who as noted in the last section, did not want to quit her job despite being unhappy with conditions of work because "…what will I do just sitting at home", also stressed that currently she does not contribute to housework at all. Describing a usual day in her life, she told me –

> "I don't do anything at home. I leave at 7 am, come back at 7.30-8 pm. When I come back, I have tea, I can't be expected to do more work then. I tell *mummy*, how can I do it, will you leave all this work for me…*Mummy* says you've become a boy, you go out of the house, you've failed even your brother and father."

Besides the negotiation of housework only among women in their families, it is interesting to note that both Sheela's and Deepti's mothers commented on how their attitude towards housework had changed after finding employment, that is, employment had caused a shift in the *kind* of labour they were willing to do. Further, their mothers' comments highlight transgressions of class and gender. Sheela's mother accused her of having become a 'queen' since she started working, not dissimilar to the housekeeper's rebuttal that she does not come from a big family who can afford servants. Deepti, on the other hand, was rebuked for surpassing her brother and father (who her mother said still did more housework than her) and for becoming a 'boy'. These comments – both by the housekeeper and these young women's mothers – offer a window into how women's employment is a site for formations and contestations of class and gender relations.

As in the case of Deepti, young women were able to negotiate, if not completely reject, housework on the premise that they get exhausted at work. Deepti's refusal to do any work at home after returning from her job was in tandem with her wanting to sit quietly and not even talk to anyone –

> "I don't talk much at home, I don't know what's happening, I don't feel like talking. At the *café*, the whole day, I'm in noise, it affects my *mind*. So when I go home, I think, I just want to sit quietly, give myself some time. But *mummy* thinks you've been away the whole day anyway, now that you're back, you're not even talking to anyone. She asks, have you sold yourself to them? What do I do…When I come back, I just want to sit on my own, I don't want more *tension*. And is it possible that if I sit with mummy, she won't tell me all the family *problems*…all

about *papa*, this is happening, that is happening…I don't have *time* for all of this. I'm already thinking about the next day and all that I have to do, I get more *tension* about that. When we leave from there, we know we didn't manage to do something, we have to do it the next day…"

Deepti's comments reveal the pressures of semi-skilled service jobs that these young women are participating in. With high pressure sales targets, this work is not only exhausting but also precarious, often affecting workers' physical and mental health in various ways. This exhaustion, however, is deployed by young women to reject family's claims on their time. That is, through employment, women may feel entitled to 'individual time' as opposed to 'collective time' (Davies, 1989). Deepti simply says, with reference to issues at home as well as housework – "I don't have time for all of this." Similarly, Aarti, whose account I opened this chapter with, told me –

"See, I don't do any housework. *Mummy* doesn't even ask me to do it. Sometimes she does, then says no, don't do it, you'll spoil it. She calls me, then she says no herself. So I just don't do it. When she says, Aarti, come, let's work, I say there's no point, you won't let me actually do it…I just use my *phone*, watch *TV*, if someone comes, I go out, do a little bit of housework. I wash dishes only one day a week, *Sunday*, I don't feel like it, I get so tired. I feel like sleeping…"

This rejection of housework, however, did not imply that they did not participate in it all. Although Aarti mentions both her unwillingness and ineptitude towards housework, she is still compelled to partake in it on Sunday, her only non-work day. Nevertheless, working women saw their participation in employment as a legitimate reason to not *fully* devote themselves to housework. They expressed a sense of entitlement to rest and sleep as well as to investment from other family members towards the reproduction of their labour. In a different context, in her study of leisure among women in Milton Keynes, Deem (1986) similarly finds that "Women in employment...were much better able both to compartmentalize their time and to assert their need for time and space for themselves, regardless of their other commitments" (p.36). It would not be presumptuous to infer that this is so, at least partly, because of their valuation as 'earning' members of the family since rest and care are largely denied to women who are primarily engaged in housework (Oakley, 1974a; Deem, 1986). In the case of unmarried women, these shifting arrangements then translated into them *helping out*

with housework with their mothers assuming primary responsibility for housework. As unmarried women, one could argue, they have the privilege of not having to take on the full burden of housework. In the supplementary interviews I conducted with married women, increased responsibility for housework was indeed noted. However, there were some instances of changes in the division of housework in nuclear families when women were involved in employment. Lovely, a 31 year old market researcher, with an eight year old son, told me she has always been restless to get out of the house. She continued this lifestyle after marriage and enlisted her husband's help to carry out the dreaded housework –

> "Yes, I just didn't want to stay at home. If I stayed at home, *mummy* would keep telling me to do stuff. And I didn't want to; till this day, I have no interest in housework. Even now, I don't do it, my *husband* does it. I left him today too, we had *lunch* and everything, but all the cleaning, he'll see to it (laughs). I like travelling, going out, sleeping – if I'm at home, I like sleeping."

Women whose husbands *helped out* with housework appreciated their labour, especially since it seemed to come at the cost of ridicule of the husband's masculinity. This was particularly evident in Sushma's narrative. Sushma, a cab driver, had long working hours; her sister helped her with childcare and her husband (who had been unemployed for a period of time) contributed to some housework at the risk of being made fun of by his family –

> "My husband does it [housework]. If it gets to 8 pm, he calls me, I tell him if I'm going to be late. So he'll give tea to children, he'll chop vegetables. He can't knead dough, he gets help from my sister who lives upstairs. I usually don't get much sleep…In the night, my child wants milk, so I don't sleep too well. In the morning, he makes tea, cleans the house, then he tells me to make food, he doesn't know how to. So yeah he's really nice, he does a lot. His family says he's become *biwi ka ghulam*, his wife's slave, they say, why don't you also start washing her clothes. He says, what's wrong with that. If she can earn, I can wash her clothes…They all make fun of him. Like my sisters-in-law, when they're at a function, they talk about how he works in the house…"

While this is suggestive of some changes in division of labour at home as a result of women participating in employment (and at times, even becoming 'breadwinners')

(also see, Luke, Xu and Thampi, 2014 for similar discussion on division of housework among tea plantation workers in southern India), the extent of this change should not be overstated – the majority of the housework is still done by women, resulting in the noted 'second shift' (Hochschild and Machung, 1990) for both married and unmarried women. Indeed, as Deem (1986) notes, for working women – "Home is not necessarily the 'peaceful haven' it is presumed to be for other family members" (p.96).

Young women's temporal dissatisfaction at home, as such, emerged in close relation to the compulsion to participate in housework if they were at home. This possibility, however, has been discounted in accounts of unemployment and temporalities based on young men's experiences. For example, in his ethnography with young men in urban Ethiopia, who found themselves unable to progress due to lack of 'respectable' professions, Mains (2007) notes -

> "The burden of too much time was a privilege of gender and urban residence…Young men were expected to perform very little household work and were generally free from participating in any activities directly associated with the reproduction of the household. In contrast, young women spent nearly all of their time doing tedious housework." (p.666)

A similar view is presented by Schielke (2008) in the setting of rural Egypt -

> "Women, whose lives are much more confined to the realm of the house and whose options for leisure are much more limited nevertheless do not appear to complain about boredom the way young men do. Nazli, a mother of two in her mid-twenties, attributes this primarily to the extensive workload women have to handle: 'I think they have no time to get bored. They are busy all the time…Their life may be boring and repetitive, with every day like the other, but they have no time to feel bored.'" (p.256)

Young women's narratives of 'staying at home' concur with the view that women do not have access to excess time in the way young men do because of their compulsory participation in housework. However, in speaking about 'staying at home' as an experience of 'nothing to do', their narratives disrupt the understanding that boredom is premised on overabundance of time. The idea that boredom is not just an excess of time or availability of free time is not a new one. Scholars recognise that even work

which may take up a lot of time, and not exclusively work that is routine or monotonous, can also be boring (Fisher, 1993). Whilst boredom associated with routine drudgery of housework has been noted (Oakley, 1974b), contemporary scholarship examining temporalities is overdetermined by young men's experiences and therefore side steps the issue of housework. For young women, boredom was then not about having too much time on their hands, instead it was about formulating alternative subjectivities for themselves. Their negotiation of housework chimed in with their attempts to not let themselves be defined as 'housewives'. The English word 'housewife' was common vocabulary among the respondents, it was mostly used to describe the occupation of other women in their families – mothers, sisters-in-law, and sisters. In part, the 'disidentification' (the next chapter discusses 'disidentification' as a strategy of self-making) or distancing from the subject position of 'housewife' manifested in the form of resistance to marriage. While they accepted that they were going to get married at some point, young women were keen to delay it as much as possible. By being occupied 'otherwise', that is, in studies or employment, they could at least postpone the inevitable. Among my respondents, who ranged from 19 to 23 years old, only one got engaged during my fieldwork (among the supplementary interviews I conducted, the oldest unmarried woman was 30 years old). Sheela specifically linked her agency regarding marriage to employment –

> "I'm the first girl in the family to go out and work, none of the boys are working either, the elder girl in the *family* is married. They wanted me to get married next, I got really angry and fought with everyone…Then mummy said let her pass *class XII*. After that…I'm intelligent enough to know what to say, what not to say…they started forcing me to get married. I got mad and just gave it to them…Then before I got my *class XII results*, I managed to get this job. Now no one says anything. They know that I'm working, they're scared that if they say too much, I might just leave home because I'm earning money."

By transitioning from class XII to employment, Sheela avoided a period of 'sitting at home', when she could have been persuaded to marry. Although Sheela referred to her financial independence, she did not keep her income to herself. It was instead spent on household and family expenses, including her younger siblings' education. While young women often faced resistance from their families when first seeking employment, as

discussed in the previous section, once they were employed, families accepted their contributions to the household income. As in the case of Sheela, there seemed to be an understanding that if women were neither in education nor working, marriage would be the logical decision. The same did not apply to men, particularly since social norms situate the man as the breadwinner and therefore marriageable only when he has a source of income. Both Mains (2007) and Jeffrey (2010b) note young men's frustration at not being able to take the next step in their life by getting married and starting a family. In contrast to that, these young women are distancing themselves from marriage by securing employment. That is, women's experience of temporal disruption is not related to being able to conform to social norms of gender, particularly those related to marriage, rather it emerges through the desire to create alternative temporal trajectories. Employment then becomes a technique of *delaying* 'progression' to becoming wives and mothers. This may, however, not always be the case. In studying the age of marriage in South Asian countries, Desai and Andrist (2010) find that their hypothesis that women's engagement in wage labour would lead to delay in marriage does not hold. They speculate that this may be because women in wage labour challenge 'gender scripts' – "Since families may perceive greater threat to their control over their daughters' sexuality with increased labor force participation, many may prefer to avoid any potential pitfalls by arranging early marriages" (p.681). Desai and Andrist's (ibid) research presents the 'big picture', based on analysis of the Indian Human Development Survey (IHDS). My close-up ethnographic research, on the other hand, suggests some bargaining power regarding marriage among urban young women entering the new service economy.

The married women I conducted supplementary interviews with also attempted to establish distance from the figure of the 'housewife'. I first met Lovely through one of my respondents, Chandni, who had been participating in the market focus groups held by Lovely's company. Lovely came with her eight year old son to meet me at the Select Citywalk mall. When I asked her to tell me about herself, she responded –

> "Yeah, I'm from *proper Delhi. My name is Lovely. And I have a nuclear family.* I have a son, *husband*, and me. I have studied *B.Com*., *husband* is *manager* at *Super Cab*. I work as a *moderator* at *CFS company*. That's my *work profile*, I'm not a *housewife,* I'm *working*."

When Chandni offered to introduce me to Lovely, she told me that she really looked up to her; she liked the way Lovely worked, travelled, and enjoyed herself, with little interference from her husband. Lovely, in other words, was not a typical 'housewife'. Chandni's boyfriend's mother, in contrast to Lovely, was someone who stayed at home and did not know much about the 'outside world'. Chandni told me –

> "His [the boyfriend's] mother is a *housewife*, she hasn't studied much. When he got admission in *private school*, his father's *madam* pretended to be his mummy. My *English* isn't too good, so he keeps telling me to learn *English*. He says when our children go to school, he doesn't want to have to take a *madam* with him."

In this scenario, when Chandni's boyfriend, whose family was better-off than hers, went to a private school (that none of my respondents could afford to go to, further discussion on schooling in the following chapter), a class chasm opened up. Anticipating the need to display upper middle class habitus, her boyfriend's father asked his employer ('madam') who could speak English to accompany him. For a future in which Chandni's boyfriend sees their children going to English-medium private schools, a wife who can speak English, dress well, and present herself confidently is desirable. Chandni, as other respondents, attributed these qualities – upper middle class habitus – to education and consequent employment. Women's employment, as such, becomes related to the 'status' of families – not merely as *reflection* of family's status but *constitutive* of family's status (Crompton, 2006) (also see, Ganguly-Scrase, 2003). Indeed, employment in these young women's narratives becomes a way to secure 'distinction' through associated lifestyle practices, such as, speaking English, recognising the importance of education, dressing well, and so on. There is, therefore, a shift in the valuation of 'working women' over the domesticated housewife, with the latter becoming even more devalued in an increasingly competitive socio-economic environment which demands 'new' skills – English, self-confidence, presentation – to compete in the new economy.

For young women, 'sitting at home', as opposed to being in employment, implies constraints of domesticity, including housework and marriage. Their experience of sitting at home as 'having nothing to do', 'nothingness', and slowness or stillness of time, is therefore not a reference to overabundance of time or an actual lack of things to do. Indeed, it would appear that there are too many things to manage if young women do

stay at home. Their narratives challenge the understanding that boredom is the privilege of gender, that is, men can be bored because they have relatively little work to do (if any at all). They further nuance the relationship between temporal disruption and socio-economic change. While the desire for employment, particularly employment that affords a certain status, is common among young men and women, for women, employment may offer an alternative to normative temporal trajectories. This is not to suggest that employment is singularly 'empowering' for women (the constraints and challenges of work will be discussed particularly in Chapters 5 and 6) but that among the lower middle classes, women's employment may constitute a site for socio-cultural transgressions (Dyson, 2008; Raju, 2011). In the next section, I further explore the meanings of 'sitting at home' and employment in relation to mobility, consumption, and friendships.

'You go out, you find things': Mobility, consumption, and friendships

> Meeta: "At home, actually, you just can't pass time. Now when I go home, my sisters say you do get tired but we feel bad staying at home. At least you go outside, you get to see what it's like out there, you've learnt how to travel."

Meeta is the youngest of five siblings; she was also, at the time I met her, the only one employed. Her elder brothers were both in college, pursuing higher education while her sisters stayed at home. One of Meeta's elder sisters had enrolled for an employability skills training course but left it midway – "She has this problem. She starts things but she can never finish them. She falls ill. Or some *problem* comes up at home." Meeta, on the other hand, had pursued the employability skills training course to completion, learning English, computers, and 'personality' skills (I discuss the process of becoming professionals through skills training in the following chapter). Through the centre, she found the job at *Cuppa n Cake* that she was doing at the time. As the only earner among her siblings, Meeta took pride in her ability to financially support her father. However, beyond her income, Meeta found value in her employment as experience in the 'outside world'. Although work was exhausting, she said she simply cannot 'pass time' at home. This slowing down of time at home was recognised by her sisters too, they were envious that she had the opportunity to see "what it's like out there". Indeed, one of her sisters had started looking for a job because she did not want to 'sit at home' anymore.

In his well-known essay, *'Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism'*, Thompson (1967) charts the transition from 'pre-industrial' task-oriented time (work is done to complete a task) to 'timed labour' (work is done to make up the work hours). He argues that this led to transformation in the way we perceive and think about time. Through employment, workers "experience a distinction between their employer's time and their 'own' time" (ibid, p.61). While this dichotomisation of work and leisure in mature industrial societies is generally accepted, researchers have also shown that this division is not always maintained – workers may subversively practice leisure at work (Roy, 1959) – and more importantly, it is not possible for some to maintain this clear-cut division, for example, where are the boundaries of work and leisure for women who are in employment and still go back home to cook dinner and put their children to sleep (Lewis, 2003)? Moreover, modern workplaces deliberately blur such boundaries – Hochschild (1997) observed two decades ago that with companies providing concierge services, 'flexible' and remote working, and so on, workers are in fact spending even more time at work than before, that work is becoming home and home is becoming work. For young women of this research, leisure if taken to mean 'free time' is already in short supply and working hours are long and arduous. It emerged through ethnographic observations and interviews that they would rather go to work than 'sit at home' and get bored – they are seeking a sense of the self through paid work, but further in opposition to Thompson's (1967) analysis, they perceive work time not necessarily only as their employers' time but their own time too.

Employment gives them some leeway in the form of a justified reason for leaving the house. Phadke, Khan and Ranade (2011) have written about the gendered nature of 'loitering' in India – while men can aimlessly wander in and occupy public spaces, women do not have equal claim to these spaces. In contrast to men's loitering, women are expected to have *reasons* to occupy public spaces. In this context, it is not surprising that the choice that young women face is between two options – they can either go to work or (literally) sit at home. Employment provides these young women a convincing justification for being outside the house (see Krishnan, 2015 for similar argument about women and education); indeed some young women spoke about how they had come to know the city and its transport systems only after they started working. While in most cases, their workplaces are not very far from their homes and neighbourhoods, they are *removed* enough to provide an escape from the time and space of home (also see, Johri

and Menon, 2014). However, the constraints of home have been under-explored in ethnographies of boredom in favour of exploration of the meanings of 'killing time' (Musharbash, 2007) or 'timepass' (Jeffrey, 2010a) in which whiling away of excess time takes on a public, and thus, masculine expression. Jeffrey (2010a) himself notes that 'timepass' is a "…privilege of gender. Young women were typically unable to participate in the types of public timepass in which young men engaged" (p.77). Men in urban Ethiopia (Mains, 2007) and Meerut College, India (Jeffrey, 2010a) spend their time at tea stalls and on street corners making their boredom visible, while women's boredom, predominantly confined to the private space, remains invisible.

This focus on public expressions of boredom has resulted in links between boredom and trouble, particularly drugs consumption and violence (Jervis, Spicer and Manson, 2003; Musharbash, 2007; Schielke, 2008), behaviour that is mostly, although not exclusively, associated with men.[21] The young women in Delhi indeed complained about men, including their fathers and brothers, passing away time by gambling, excessively drinking, and standing at street corners harassing women. This was confirmed on my field visits to Dakshnipuri and Khanpur – while women appeared to always be *on their way* to somewhere, it was not uncommon to see men just hanging around. Attempts to 'kill time' or engage in 'timepass' as such seemed non-existent among young women. Further, most of the respondents had experienced only short-term boredom in contrast to longer lasting boredom in other ethnographic accounts (Mains, 2007; Musharbash, 2007; Schielke, 2008; Jeffrey, 2010a), busying themselves either with employment or skills training. However, some of them made links between mental health and boredom. Rama, mother to a one year old, said that when she had taken a break from work after her daughter was born, she felt ill all the time – head aches, stomach aches, nausea, and so on. Commenting on this, Rama observed that she had become hypochondriac

[21] In his treatise on time and power in '*Pascalian Meditations*', Bourdieu (2000) also offers a similar link between disrupted temporalities and violence/trouble based on his study of unemployment among the Kabyle peasants – "Excluded from the game, dispossessed of the vital illusion of having a function or a mission, of having to be or do something, these people may, in order to escape from the non-time of a life in which nothing happens and where there is nothing to expect, and in order to feel they exist, resort to activities which, like...the gambling systems of all the bidonvilles and favelas of the world, offer an escape from the negated time of a life without justification or possible investment, by recreating the temporal vector and reintroducing expectation, for a moment..." (p.222). This link between unemployment, boredom, and 'trouble' is, however, not uncontested. Musharbash (2007), for example, argues that "…people 'kill time' not because they are bored but as a reaction against the circumstances that also generate boredom" (p.314).

because she was out of work. Sushma told me that her sister, who was a 'housewife', had started having suicidal thoughts because she did not have anything to do; once she joined a course of study, her mental health improved. Jervis, Spicer and Manson (2003) make some preliminary links between depression and boredom, these women's narratives highlight it as an area for further research.

Employment may have an impact on women's mental wellbeing because it provides them a 'social' space, particularly a space for friendship (Deem, 1986; Andrew and Montague, 1998; Pettinger, 2005). This may involve both making friends at work and/or finding work with friends, and often resulted in friends/colleagues travelling to and from work together, sharing their frustrations, making fun of managers, talking about colleagues, and so on. There was certainly a sense of 'adventure' about employment because it offered young women a space to cultivate friendships. Engaging with theorisations of women's leisure, Green (1998) argues for the distinctive value of female friendship against the understanding that they are trivial and socially insignificant. Other scholars have rescued 'friendship' from the 'private' domain, showing how such collaborations can be fostered at and through work (but not solely maintained at work, friendships may spill over from one 'compartment' into another, see Andrew and Montague, 1998). Based on a study of retail workers in the UK, Pettinger (2005) shows that friendships are important for "gaining and keeping employment in retail chain stores" (p.39), particularly for women workers. This was evident among my respondents – if I was to draw a network map of how I met each respondent, it would appear in the form of a web, depicting connections between the respondents. For some young women, friendships allowed them mobility and access to employment in the first place. Chandni and Chitra who had been friends since school went for job interviews as a pair, they worked separately for a while, but towards the end of my fieldwork they told me they had managed to find jobs in the same office again. They had been supportive of each other in their first job in a call centre, challenging a manager who had been sexually harassing another young woman in the office. Chandni, who had also known Prachi since school, briefly joined the café where Prachi and Sheela worked. They all spoke about how they enjoyed travelling together to the café every day and were upset when Chandni was transferred to a different branch of the café. Chandni and Sheela became friends while working at the café, but their friendship continued even after Chandni quit café work. Similarly, Jahanvi said her father trusted her best

friend, Niharika, allowing them to go out together. She was accompanied by Niharika when she first went to the mall to find employment. Sarita became friends with Jahanvi at *Donut Time*, where they both initially worked. Jahanvi left and joined *Chai & Chat* and Sarita eventually joined her there –

> Me: "How did you find out about the *job* at *Chai & Chat*?"
>
> Sarita: "Through Jahanvi. I had asked her to tell me if there's a *job*. So she told me…I knew Jahanvi from *Donut Time*."
>
> Me: "Ok, what happened in the *interview* here?"
>
> Sarita: "Not much… I didn't feel like doing it for Rs.9000 [GBP 90 per month], but *sir* said they'll increase it in two months…I thought it's better to do this than sit at home. When we're here, we find out about jobs. You go somewhere, you meet someone, you find out stuff. It makes a difference as compared to sitting at home."

Mahesh, manager of *Yuva Mandal*, a skills training centre, noted this pattern of women's preference for finding employment together. He insisted that this created an additional hurdle for women's entry into employment. He tried to dissuade students at the centre from 'waiting' for their friends and encouraged them to accept the first offer to gain experience before entering such negotiations. However, these young women's experiences highlight how, as Andrew and Montague (1998) note in the autobiographical reflection on their friendship, "…friendship is not just about companionship or sociability, important though these may be, but acts as a resource which can help us cope with the problems and contingencies which we face in our daily lives" (p.355).

For older and married women who I conducted supplementary interviews with, employment was a second chance, following time out of education, to cultivate friendships. Lovely told me that she had lost contact with school and college friends once she finished studying. But she managed to find people to socialise with when she entered employment. She expressed a sense of fulfilment with employment suggesting that work and colleagues gave her what home and family could not have –

> "Hmm we used to have some fights in the house, my *husband* would never take me anywhere. So once I started going out, he thought I wasn't asking him to go out

anymore. I get tired now. And I have *friends*, so I go with them. Like today, I came with Chandni. My *office* work is also such that I have to go to different places. So I've got the right kind of work. My family is happy too, my *husband* also says you've got your *type* of work."

While female friendships were an important aspect of employment for young women, friendships with male colleagues were not easy in the same way. Interactions with male colleagues seemed to be charged with anxiety – Prachi had quit her last job at a boutique because a guy had started 'liking' her and she did not want it to escalate. In some instances, young women's wariness regarding men's interest in them stemmed from previous experiences of sexual harassment – Jahanvi suggested that she was fired from her job at *Donut Time* because she refused to reciprocate her manager's advances (further discussed in Chapter 5). However, these experiences were not uniform; for some young women, employment offered the space to meet young men and enter into relationships. Both Chandni and Chitra had met their boyfriends or 'BFs', as they called them, at work. Jahanvi also had no hesitation in telling me that she enjoyed the attention from her male colleagues at *Chai & Chat*, there were lots of jokes about who could play her 'boyfriend' and who was her 'brother'. She indulged in this interaction with men at work and noted that this was a lifestyle change for her –

"[My father]…used to say, if I see a boy looking at you, I would destroy them. Now I even work with boys, we play, we have fun together. I told him, *papa*, all the boys were saying when I get married, they will stay over and *drink* after the party, and *papa* said ok! I'm allowed to stay outside at work but not beyond that, but that will also change slowly."

These lifestyle changes, in the form of 'freedom', extended from working with boys and having BFs to eating pizzas and going to birthday parties. While, as already noted, most young women's salaries went into household expenses, they were able to claim at least some part of it. For some women, this meant asking their mothers for a monthly allowance whereas others saved a portion in their bank accounts. Regardless of the type of claim made, young women felt that since this was money they earned, they could spend it without having to explain the expenditure to their parents. In particular, these expenditures that young women did not want to have to explain to their parents included 'new consumption' that has been closely associated with the new global

economy in India (Osella and Osella, 1999; Fernandes, 2004). Jahanvi, for example, liked to occasionally spend on 'parties' at work as well as on personal items –

> "Right now I get Rs.9000 [GBP 90] but from January I'll get Rs.10,000 [GBP 100]. My family still thinks it's Rs.6000 [GBP 60]…I'm saving that extra money. For my clothes, etc., my parents give me money. But I splurge it with Niharika [best friend]…If my sisters want to buy something…you know some things we can't tell *papa*…like my *bra, panty*, I buy the expensive ones. Others can wear cheap ones, like the Rs.50 [50 pence] ones, and be ok with them. I can't, I have an *allergy*…If I tell *mummy*, she'd think I'm crazy for spending Rs.250 [GBP 2.50]. She'd say, are you a rich person's spoilt brat?! And she'd tell me to try another one if I have *allergy*. So it's things like that that I spend on. I also don't tell *mummy* when we have *party* in the *office*, she'd say you can have something nice at home for Rs.200 [GBP 2], there all friends contributed Rs.500 [GBP 5], so I *swipe* my *card* too."

The ease with which Jahanvi swipes her card on these 'new' expenditures that their parents would not have indulged in and would not approve of was reiterated by other young women too. They mostly kept relationships with BFs – which included a range of expenses, including eating out, buying gifts, going for parties – secret from their parents. Aarti noted the autonomy that comes from earning your own money –

> "You have a different kind of right over your own income, as compared to your parents' income. You can't ask parents for money for everything. You know if we want to buy a *gift* for someone, our parents might object, why are you giving such an expensive gift to someone. We have to make a *list* to explain everything, where you're going, what you're spending on. If it's your own money, you don't have to make *list*…"

Work then afforded a certain sense of lack of accountability to these young women – the time spent at work was *their* time. However, this discussion does not suggest that the space of work is uniformly pleasurable and free of conflict. I also do not imply that boredom was only experienced from 'sitting at home' and never at work. Indeed, there is no dearth of literature on workers' boredom due to routine of and lack of control over work (Fine, 1990; Fisher, 1993). Among the respondents, there were some suggestions of boredom at work but these were few and far in between as compared to the multiple reiterations of boredom from sitting at home. Young women, as this discussion shows,

valued the *sociability* that work offered – being able to go out, spend the day in the company of colleagues and friends, eat different kinds of food, and so on. In telling me about the kinds of jobs she had previously done, Prachi mentioned feeling bored as a receptionist where she did not have a chance to meet many people –

> "I worked somewhere as a *receptionist* for 10-15 days. *I got highly bored.* It was a small *office*…That job I got through my sister-in-law, she worked in that office. Mummy said go for it even though I didn't really want to do it. *I got really really bored*. There was not much to do…a little bit of inquiry, register entries, phone call, that's it. Everyday I'd wait for it to turn 6 pm. People were nice in the *office*. But I just didn't see myself there."

She went on to work at *Cuppa n Cake* with Sheela and Chandni where the issue of boredom did not arise. Roy (1959) has written about his experience of working in a factory where he initially didn't understand the importance of 'silly' communication between employees but as he became more a part of the group, he realised the value of what he calls 'banana time' or time that employees sneaked out of their work to keep each other engaged. In 'social' workplaces, this was a common experience. Colleagues exchanged banter with one another and at times, managers also participated in maintaining a 'lively' environment at workplaces. Aarti, whose job at the front desk of a stationery room was not dissimilar from Prachi's receptionist job, told me that one of the managers made sure that she did not get bored –

> "You should talk to *sir* before you go. He's very funny. He keeps us entertained. I sit at the window, I can't really talk much there, employees keep coming to the window. It's *front* work, right…So I get quite bored. Sir says, come in, and then talks about funny things."

Of course, relationships with managers were not easy going and hierarchies were very much maintained in workplaces (I discuss managerial dynamics in detail in Chapter 5). Further, young women were aware of the limitations of their 'jobs' that they saw as distinct from their 'careers' (also see Fleming, 2018, further discussion in Chapter 6). In her study of employees of Amerco, a Fortune 500 company in America, Hochschild (1997) notes that employees face two kinds of 'time binds' - "Senior managers and professionals generally said they devoted long hours to work because they loved their jobs; assembly-line workers said they worked double shifts because they needed the

money" (p.xxii). Her observation captures the two diametrically opposite ways that participation in work is commonly seen – you work either out of need for money or because of your aspirations, passion, love for the job. These young women's narratives challenge that diametric opposition – while necessity was a factor in their participation in employment, and they were particularly conscious of their vulnerable position as lower middle class women in workplaces, they distanced themselves from necessity by insisting that they were entering employment to avoid boredom. At the same time, they were not *devoted* to these jobs in the new economy, indeed their narratives suggest that they were means to an end. This section shows how employment provided the time in which young women could access 'leisure' in various ways – by cultivating friendships and relationships, by sharing banter (and at times conflict) with colleagues and managers, and 'new consumption' that their parents would not approve of. As such, although the time spent at work is not 'free time', thus not 'leisure' in the strictest sense, it provided them a way to access *socialities* which would otherwise be denied if they stayed at home. This contributes to nuancing the understanding of leisure as not only availability of free time, but as a way to access 'meaning' in life. The understanding that the space of 'home' is experienced differently by men and women in relation to leisure is not new (Deem, 1986); while men can rest and rejuvenate at home, for women, including the respondents for this research, this is rarely the case. In not wanting to be bored housewives, these young women are seeking a sense of leisure, and as such fulfilment, from their employment.

Conclusion

This chapter explores narratives of temporalities among young women seeking work in the new service economy. In particular, it draws attention to changes in the temporal valuation of the spaces of home and work through the interrelated concepts of 'boredom' and 'leisure'. In seeking and entering employment, young women distanced themselves from necessity by insisting on their desire to enter employment because the alternative – sitting at home – is boring. Employment, on the other hand, while not always amenable, offered an alternative in the form of practices of 'leisure' to young women. This chapter establishes shifts in the value attached to domesticity and the labour market, highlighting lower middle class women's desire to enter employment as a practice of 'distinction' (also see, Ganguly-Scrase, 2003). Through young women's

experiences, it also intervenes in emerging scholarship on temporal disruptions and socio-economic change, which is largely based on young men's experiences (Jervis, Spicer and Manson, 2003; Mains, 2007; Jeffrey, 2010a).

Through their articulations of boredom – 'I can't just sit at home' or 'What will I do sitting at home' – young women are rejecting the space of the home and associated social experiences. As I have shown, this expression is not a lack of things to do, it is rather a rejection of the things to be done. In particular, by resisting staying at home, young women are negotiating the compulsion to domesticity, including participation in housework and the pressure to get married. While men's experiences of temporal disruption in the context of socio-economic change have been noted through practices of hanging out, killing time, timepass, and even violence in public spaces, women's boredom is not paid enough attention due to its confinement to the 'private' space of the home. These young women's sense of having 'nothing to do' at home is concurrent with neoliberal valuation of the self through paid work. However, their experiences demonstrate the gender differentials in interactions with socio-economic change – whereas for young men, unemployment may disrupt normative temporal trajectories, for young women, on the contrary, unemployment or sitting at home *maintains* normative temporal trajectories.

Young women positioned employment in opposition to home, assigning it temporal significance – while the time spent at home is characterised by 'nothing to do', time spent at work is *productive*. By seeking employment, these young women are not only dissociating themselves from domesticity but also accessing 'leisure' in different ways. Through employment, young women interact with the 'outside' world, maintain and develop friendships, as well as participate in 'new consumption'. Leisure is, as such, not necessarily separate from work (although they situate it as separate from home), accessed in typical spaces of leisure (such as parks, sports centres, shopping malls), or reliant on availability of time. Instead, it emerges through their valuation as working women. By asserting their exhaustion from work, young working women are also able to claim rest and sleep at home (also see, Deem, 1986).

Interestingly, although employment emerged as desirable among young lower middle class women, they did not necessarily envision 'careers' in these fields. Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 will further explore the instability and temporariness of women's

employment. Nevertheless, at the point of seeking entry into employment, young women engage with temporalities of the new economy to gain recognition, and therefore, value. As young women who are educated and who have employment opportunities in the service economy, they can access alternative temporal trajectories, and, hence, alternative subjectivities. Indeed "It would be difficult to experience boredom unless we anticipated the possibility of something else" (Conrad, 1997, p. 468). It is therefore not simply the rarity of time (Mains 2007; Jeffrey 2010a; also see, Bourdieu, 2000), rather it is the *recognition* of the rarity of time through legitimised practices that determines social value of a person. While a complex interplay of socio-economic change, precarity, and respectability informs young women's decision about entering employment, their narratives suggest changing temporal valuations of home and employment. Young women enter employment distancing themselves from both necessity that may have characterised the paid work of the previous generation and domesticity that may have characterised the labour of their mothers. This chapter explores young women's motivations to participate in the new service economy; the next chapter further explores the 'newness' of their employment, highlighting their efforts to adapt their 'habitus' to meet the requirements of the new economy.

CHAPTER 4

‘I’m not like that girl’: Disidentification

Image 6: An English coaching centre in Dakshinpuri

Introduction

I had accompanied Rama, a community worker, on her visits to the Jagdamba camp, a slum in Khirki, on a few occasions. Part of Rama's job was to persuade women in Jagdamba to attend skills training that her employer (a non-government organisation) was offering free of cost to enhance women's employability. Although the Jagdamba women, who were working as domestic workers, were initially unconvinced, the turnout at the training was unexpectedly high. In a large room in the non-government organisation office in Khirki, I sat in a circle of around twenty women. The training had been advertised as a cooking workshop, where women could learn how to cook non-Indian food (pastas, salads, Chinese – the idea was that this would help women find jobs with 'high class' families) but the first part of the training was dedicated to a session on 'self-confidence'. The trainer began by asking the women to introduce themselves. As women started speaking, they were interrupted by the trainer and told to spend some time thinking about the question – 'Who am *I*?' They were encouraged to respond without referring to their husbands, children, or other family relationships. The idea, the trainer said, was to recognise yourself as an individual.

After the introductions, the trainer initiated an exercise. All the women were handed a candy and a small pebble. They were asked to place the pebble in their slippers and walk around while eating the candy. The women were amused but complied, we sat down after a minute. The trainer asked – "How did that feel?" A few women responded – "The pebble hurt." The trainer paused there and told the women that this exercise was a lesson – while all of us were eating a sweet candy, the thing that we focused on was the pebble in our slippers. That is, we are inclined to see the bad but not the good things in life. The trainer summarised the lesson – in order to do better in life, you should practice positive thinking; learn to let go of negativity. By the time we got to the second half of the training – a cooking lesson by a male chef – the women were keen to leave. A few women, who I was standing with at the back, mocked the 'non-Indian' food he cooked – a dish of paneer (Indian cottage cheese) in white sauce. "It tastes of nothing," they scoffed.

In this chapter, I open up an inquiry into the process of young women *entering* and becoming 'professionals' in the new service economy. The training session in Khirki, although not meant for women entering new service work, highlights (quite starkly) the

discord between women workers' lived experiences and circulating workers' subjectivities. Further, it evidences women's own consciousness, and at times, rejection of the process of becoming professionals. The respondents for this research reflected on their efforts, as neophyte service workers, to meet the requirements of the changing economy – higher education, English speaking, interview skills, customer management, etc. They enrolled in open learning undergraduate degree programmes and attended skills training at centres in their neighbourhoods. However, the very deliberate acquiring of such habitus meant that they were always conscious of their lack of economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1990; Lawler, 1999). Their families and schools were unable to provide resources, support or guidance to enable their entry into work. In interviews and conversations, these young women then spoke about innate traits that have helped them enter the world of work despite the struggles they face. The question I pose is, therefore, divergent from Willis' (1997) question – 'How working class kids get working class jobs'. Instead I ask – how do lower middle class women get jobs that require upper middle class habitus? What are the discourses they draw upon in claiming a place in the new service economy? Further, what pleasures and injuries do they accrue in the process of becoming workers?

Since I met my respondents in their capacity as workers in the new service economy, their narratives, at least in our initial meetings, were very much framed around their subject position as workers. They spoke about the kind of work they do, and more importantly, the kind of work they do not, and would not do (further discussed in Chapter 5). In this chapter, I specifically focus on the production of 'work-based subjects' (du Gay, 1996). Reflecting on the changing nature of work, and particularly the expansion of service work, scholars have engaged with emerging forms of work subjectivities (du Gay, 1996; Gooptu, 2009; Walkerdine and Bansel, 2010). While there are differences, often considerable, in the arrangement of service work in different parts of the world (hence the need to be attentive to local topographies of work), there is agreement that it is increasingly characterised by consumption, individualisation, and entrepreneurialism (du Gay, 1996; Fernandes, 2000; Gooptu, 2009, 2013a).

Of course, workers' subjectivities are not confined to work or workplaces but are in a dialectical relationship with subjectivities formed at the sites of family, education, communities, and so on. Further, they are not fixed, rather they are always in the

process of being constituted. Through young women's narratives, I am particularly interested in exploring the inflections of gender and class in the formation of workers' subjectivities. In the Indian context, the study of women's work has largely been informed through the binary positions of either working class women who work out of necessity, for example, as paid domestic workers (Ray and Qayum, 2009), or securely middle and upper class women who build 'careers' with higher educational and symbolic capital, for example, women in information technology (Radhakrishnan, 2011; Upadhya, 2011; Belliappa, 2013). The lower middle class women of this research, employed in semi-skilled service work, are however in a liminal position. In emerging scholarship on gender and the New Middle Class in India, their subjectivities have been primarily defined through the concept of "…aspiration as a mediating force that binds the lower strata of the middle classes to the elite, high class urban professionals" (Vijayakumar, 2013, p. 778).

In this chapter, I critique the over-reliance on the concept of 'aspirations' that suggests that young women on the fringes of working and middle classes idealise identification with the upper classes. As with the women scoffing at the cooking class – "It tastes of nothing" – the respondents for this research reflected on the artifice of individualism, entrepreneurialism, and consumption in the new service economy. Instead of aspiring to globalised youth identities (Brown, Scrase and Ganguly-Scrase, 2017), young women asserted that they have entered work through innate traits and in spite of many struggles. The traits that marked this difference ranged from an unusual interest and excellence in studies, intuitive communication and people skills to good looks, good taste, obstinacy, street smartness, and so on. More importantly, these innate traits distanced the respondents from those around them – I am different from my family (or my family is different from other families), I am not like the people in my neighbourhood (or specifically I am not like the girls in my neighbourhood), I have always stood out from those around me. This 'disidentification' (Butler, 1993; Muñoz, 1999; Skeggs, 2004a) of gender and class, which I explore in the chapter, reiterates how women's work is a site of formations and contestations of gender and class.

The chapter is structured as follows – I first explore how young women interact with the requirements of work in the new economy, particularly in modelling themselves as professionals through training courses and at job interviews. I highlight how young

women are not simply "taken in by the game" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 98). Instead, they reflect on its artifice, particularly on the mismatch between the requirements and the experiences of service jobs. Secondly, while workers' subjectivities are commonly portrayed as coherent, I show how young women were constantly aware of their 'lack' and constraints in the new economy. Finally, in negotiating their lack of capital in work spaces, young women produce narratives of 'exceptionalism' or innate traits that establish them as different. Young women's 'disidentification' or distancing from those around them, I suggest, characterises the process of becoming service professionals. While the previous chapter asserts young women's desire for employment, this chapter highlights cracks in 'aspirations' through narratives of reflection and even recalcitrance over belonging in the new economy.

'Myself in English': Becoming service professionals

> Me: "How did you find that job?"
>
> Jahanvi: "I prepared a *résumé* first, then I went to each *shop* in the *mall* one by one. In shops they asked me to talk about *myself* in *English*. When I did, they said, this is *myself,* like you'd say it in *school*, try to say it better. But I didn't know how to do it. Then she said, *sorry*, we can't offer you a *job* in that case. Nobody had ever told me how to do it in the *interview*, like you don't talk about your father and sisters, you have to talk about yourself."

I was introduced to Jahanvi by her younger sister, who I had met at a non-government organisation's literacy classes in Khanpur. The first time I went to meet Jahanvi at her home, she had come back from work. Sitting cross-legged on the single bed in a small room in her family's second storey flat, Jahanvi warmly welcomed me and immediately started talking about how much she enjoys her work at *Chai & Chat* in the mall. "I'm the only girl at the *café* right now, and actually I don't want another girl to be hired there," Jahanvi giggled. Over our next few meetings, I got to know Jahanvi, visiting her at home and at the café she worked in, as a friendly and confident young woman who is very keen to stay in work. But Jahanvi told me she was not always this confident. Jahanvi comes from a family traditionally involved in the work of ironing clothes, her grandparents had done this work, and both her parents still did this work. Jahanvi, however, began her search for work at the mall, detracting from her family's work history. She went to various shops and handed out her résumé. In the quote above,

Jahanvi told me about her first experience of job interview. The interviewer asked her to talk about herself in English – in the unfamiliar *mise-en-scène* of service work, she did not know that she was expected to articulate her 'self' as an individual, instead she relied on description of herself with reference to her family.

Responding to the class gap in the backgrounds of workers and the new requirements of work, many employability skills training centres have bourgeoned in low-income neighbourhoods in Delhi. The concern with skilling youth has been articulated at a national level. NITI Aayog, the policy think-tank for the government in India, has identified skills development as a priority, with the vision to skill 40 million young people by 2022 (*Report of the Sub-Group of Chief Ministers on Skill Development*, 2015). Skills centres, set up as public-private partnership, are integral to this goal. While these skills centres are aimed at skilling youth to meet the demands of service employment, some of them specifically encourage, mobilise, and train young women to enter work, propelled by concern with low female labour force participation rate in the country. During fieldwork, I spoke to managers at three skills centres, observed two training sessions, and asked women about training they had received. Popular courses at skills training centres in Khanpur and Dakshinpuri included basic computers, English speaking, administrative and finance software, and retail management.

On one of my visits to *Yuva Mandal,* a skills centre, I noted the 'success stories' posters on walls, books entitled 'Get That Dream Job', 'Spoken English for My World', and so on, and computer equipped classrooms. The manager, Mahesh, introduced me to some of the students at the centre and told me that they assess all candidates through the 'CAN' framework – commitment, ability, and neediness (with the latter in particular referring to the low-income backgrounds of students being trained to enter semi-skilled service work). Following the completion of training, the centre attempted to place students with employers like Burger King, Pizza Hut, PVR cinemas, etc. *Yuva Mandal*, he told me, charged a nominal fee for both specialised and general employability courses. The general course aimed to train students in information technology, spoken English, and 'personality development'. Priya, who had previously worked for a call centre and attempted job interviews at McDonald's as well as an insurance company, told me that she had enrolled for a similar general employment training at *Pehel,* another skills centre –

> Priya: "Yes, I did a *computer course*, there is a centre called *Pehel*. They give us *training* for *jobs*, how to behave, how to talk, what our *body language* should be, how to make *eye contact*, all of that. And *English knowledge* and *computers*."
>
> Me: "So that's to prepare you for a job. Tell me a bit more about it…"
>
> Priya: "They do a *trial,* there's an *interview* for the six months course…They started all of this *training*…They told us how to behave when we go [for interviews], you have to *wish good morning* or *good afternoon*, you have to maintain *eye contact* and look straight ahead, don't move your arms, stand perfectly, *shoulders* should be straight. And what you have to say, present it in a way that it convinces the person in front of you. If you have to sell, that's the main thing. If we can't make them understand, we can't convince them to buy."

The component of 'personality development', in other words, involves work upon the habitus, changing the way one speaks, walks, and even stands. Although Bourdieu's conceptualisation of habitus has been amply criticised for being too deterministic, it has been re-worked and re-appropriated to understand the instability of and fractures in habitus, particularly at times of rapid social change (Aarseth, Layton and Nielsen, 2016). Later work by Bourdieu considers the possibilities of 'cleft' habitus or discordant habitus (Bourdieu, 2000; Silva, 2016). The 'hysteresis' or 'torment' (Bourdieu, 2000) caused by friction between habitus and field – between these women's 'lower middle classness' and the new service economy that caters to middle and upper class consumers – can generate reflexivity. Although Priya learnt that to sell something, you have to convince the buyer, there is consciousness that as the seller, she is only *presenting* it in a way that it convinces the buyer. She can list the things she is supposed to do – stand up straight, make eye contact, keep arms in place, and so on. Prachi, who I met when she worked in a café, felt similarly about her 'performance' as a worker. She greeted me with "Good morning, ma'am" and a big smile during our early interactions at *Cuppa n Cake*. As our relationship grew beyond that of a customer and a worker, and we continued meeting after she had quit her café job, one day she remarked how much she had disliked having to "keep a *plastic smile* on the whole day".

Being a worker in new urban spaces also entails fashioning "oneself simultaneously as commodity and consumer" (Walkerdine and Bansel, 2010, p. 493). The workers are expected to embody what they are selling to the customer in order to be 'convincing'.

Employees of cafés usually underwent up to 10 days of training prior to joining work. This training period was meant to familiarise them with the history of coffee, different techniques of brewing coffee, making various types of coffee – a sort of immersion into the product they would be selling – as well as sales and customer handling skills. Notably, none of the café workers were consumers of coffees themselves (we always either had tea or Coca Cola); more importantly, none of the sales service workers could afford to be customers in the urban spaces they were employed in. This is, however, not to suggest that young women maintained their 'original' habitus even as they came into interaction with new fields, with new modes of comportment, behaviour, and being. Changes in their habitus were evident in their consumption – young women spoke about wearing 'Western' clothes, buying smartphones, eating in Pizza Hut and so on (as discussed partly in the previous chapter; I further discuss changes to bodily comportment in detail in Chapter 5). Chandni, who worked in cafés, call centres, and on ad hoc events assignments during my fieldwork, was particularly keen to fashion herself as a professional worker from a good 'background'. When I asked her about her family, Chandni told me –

> "*Mamma* and *papa* are both doing jobs. There's the *Doordarshan company*, *mamma* works there as an *assistant* for a *madam*, dealing with files, etc. *Papa* used to be a medicine checker. Medicines that came from out of India, he approved them. But then there was some problem, you might know, with *Ranbaxy*, so papa had to leave that job. By then, he'd grown old. So for a while he was just at home…"

Chandni then switched modes and started showing me photos on her phone. She pointed to a photo of her younger brother – "My brother is 16 years old, he's studying in class XI. Yesterday we had a fight, I had to shower, my *conditioner packet* was finished. I kept calling him for hours, he didn't come home, then I just lost it …"; of her mother – "If you see my *mamma*, you won't believe she's my mother…"; of herself – "Oh this *dress*, it's nice, it's not mine though. It's a friend's. I tried it on. I'll get one like this. I do all this at home (laughs). This dress, [my boyfriend] bought for me, as a gift for our second *anniversary*…" In this quick succession of images, Chandni engaged in an "act of creation" (Byrne, 2003, p. 30), presenting her life to me through her consumption (Osella and Osella, 1999; Maguire and Stanway, 2008) – mobile phone, use of

conditioner, dresses, and indeed the boyfriend who bought her a gift for their anniversary. Chandni glossed over the 'newness' of this consumption quite naturally. The production of self at the site of work, even though resisted to a certain extent by young women, should therefore be seen as part of "…everyday practices which typically occur as 'moments' within a very wide range of other kinds of activities, rather than as one-off set piece performances" (Stanley, 2000, p. 41). That is, although young women reflect on the deliberate alterations to their habitus, they also naturalise it to a certain extent. Further, as would be expected, there were variations in young women's 'feel of the game' in the field depending on how long they had been in it. Chandni, who as I already noted worked in various jobs during my fieldwork, was equipped in 'job speak'. She took pride in doing well at interviews; she had been to one recently for the post of receptionist at an office but she told me it was 'weird' –

> "…it was a weird *interview*. They didn't ask so much about me, they asked a lot about my *family*. What does your father do, what does your mother do, what job did your father do before…It was like they were hiring my father rather than me for the *job*. Then they kept my *résumé* and said they'd call me. I didn't check."

Chandni was surprised to be asked about her family in a job interview and did not bother following up on that job. Interestingly, both Jahanvi (whose account I opened this section with) and Chandni show awareness of the employers' evaluation of their class – through being asked to speak in English in Jahanvi's case and being asked about her father's occupation in Chandni's case. While Jahanvi was not fluent in English, Chandni was reluctant to speak about her father who was unemployed throughout the duration of my fieldwork. Interestingly, Chandni, as the more practiced worker, resisted the employers' subjectification by drawing upon the 'individual self' or the 'myself' that Jahanvi was initially unfamiliar with. Similarly, once Jahanvi had encountered the *mise-en-scène* of service work, she told me that she decided to change the way she dressed and approached prospective employers in the mall –

> "Then the next day, I went in a *black dress*. I asked for *vacancies*, the girls there said there was nothing going, but there was a sir at the back. He asked me to come in. He said there are no vacancies but you have a very nice face, very *attractive*, maybe we can keep you. There might be *vacancies* in a month or two but we could hire you now. He asked me to do the *interview*. But he didn't really

ask me the same questions, like about *myself*. He just asked me to read out my *résumé*, he wanted to check if I can do it, they didn't want much more. Then he said go to our Okhla office and do the *interview* there, don't take *tension*, they'll *select* you, I'll *call* them. So, I went there and they selected me."

Through her failure at the last interview, Jahanvi had managed to gather intelligence about the nature and requirements of work at the mall. She decided to wear a black dress, which was not only a small change of clothes, but a deliberate change of habitus that could signal suitability for service work to employers in the mall. Jahanvi told me that the manager in the shop was willing to hire her despite the lack of vacancies because he thought she had a 'very nice face'. He also did not ask her the same questions that she had encountered at her last interview, assuring her that she would be selected for the job. Although Jahanvi was aware that she was relying on her attractiveness to secure a job, this was her way of getting her foot in the door without having to spend time becoming fluent in English. Therefore, although as new entrants to the field, young women demonstrate reflexivity about the compulsion to alter their habitus, they may also recall their altered habitus to navigate injurious subjectifications.

To return to Prachi's dislike of the 'plastic smile' she had to keep on the whole day in the café, I suggest that these adaptations of habitus are best conceptualised as plasticity of habitus. Building on Bourdieu's cleft habitus, Abrahams and Ingram (2016) have drawn attention to how fractures in habitus, while injurious, are not always completely negative. Befitting my conceptualisation of plastic habitus, Abrahams and Ingram's (2013) study with working class students in Bristol involved asking them to construct plasticine models of their identities. They show that many students were able to develop a 'chameleon habitus' and thus, managed to adjust to multiple fields, negotiating home and university. However, in young women's interactions with employability training and job interviews, discomfort rather than adjustment to fields was more apparent. Their recognition of the need to be convincing, to appear confident, and to overcome their backgrounds through speaking English, I argue, indicate conscious stylisation of habitus to meet the requirements of the new economy. This process of 'moulding' highlights the need to "move away from the search for essential, universal or even rational identities and…stress on the more uncertain and creative

processes of construction and fabrication" (Byrne, 2003, p. 30) in understanding workers' subjectivities.

As neophyte workers in the new service economy, young women have to acquire new subjectivities through training and experience. At skills centres, young women may learn to narrate 'myself' in English, and compose tabular resumes[22], but changes to comportment are always slightly detached from their habitus. Their interactions with prospective employers are particularly of interest because their parents would not have had to present resumes, appear for formal interviews or craft their appearance and body language to gain employment as domestic workers, manual labourers, cleaners, or rickshaw pullers. In their early encounters with employers in the new service economy, young women reflect on their habitus lag or 'tug' (Ingram, 2011) although as they spend more time in the field, their experiences begin to inform a certain plasticity of habitus. Through plastic habitus, young women are able to navigate the requirements of the new economy while also consciously reflecting on these changes. This conceptualisation contributes to understanding subjectivities, including workers' subjectivities, as unstable, contingent (du Gay, 1996), and processual. More importantly, young women's reflections are always imbued with consciousness of their 'lack' that I discuss in the next section.

'A life full of tensions': Reflections on lack and struggle

> Prachi: "We couldn't afford *private school* and I never asked my mother for *tuitions*. We couldn't afford that either. With *government school*, our fees were low, like Rs.100-200 or less. Then life went on. I couldn't particularly focus because of the situation at home. What do I tell you about how I took exams, on one side my parents would be fighting and I would sit there with my books open…There would be crying and all…So we've mostly seen a life full of *tensions*. But even then, we haven't asked for much from life. Only that if not luxury, we

[22] I reviewed some respondents' resumes that they had prepared with assistance from staff at skills training centres and from one another. They followed the usual prescribed structure – Name, Address, Career Objective, Educational Qualification, Work Experience, Personal Details (see Appendix III). The only free-flowing text in the otherwise rigid tabular structure of resumes was the stated 'career objective'. These career statements did not demonstrate much variance either, deploying a series of common key words – 'hard work', 'self-confidence', and willingness to deal with 'challenges' – as demonstration of workers' individual entrepreneurialism (for further discussion on curriculum vitae as an instrument of producing an 'audit self' see Stanley, 2000).

should get a peaceful life. All of us in the family have tried to contribute in some way. Tried to not go on the wrong track, I've tried not to add to the problems my mother and sister already have."

I first met Prachi in my early days of fieldwork when she was working at *Cuppa n Cake*. Shortly after that, she quit her job over disagreement and dispute with the café manager (further discussed in Chapter 6). I eventually hired Prachi as my research assistant and we got on really well – we bonded over feminism, reading fiction, and food. Perhaps out of all of my respondents, I spent most time with Prachi, getting to know her outside of work. Prachi introduced me to her sisters – Anamika and Priya – and to many of her friends but I never got to meet her parents or visit her house. On our visits to Dakshinpuri – her neighbourhood – Prachi would either take me to Chandni's house, which was close to the main road, or to the market. Over several visits to Dakshinpuri and conversations with my respondents and their families, I became more aware of the topography of the neighbourhood. Although Chandni lived in a one bedroom flat with her family on a well-paved street, Prachi lived in the 'slum' part of Dakshinpuri. The slum in Dakshinpuri, JJ Camp, although not a makeshift or temporary arrangement, has poorer conditions of living – water logging, smaller houses, and lack of space. Prachi, as I came to understand retrospectively, presented herself as 'removed' from her circumstances (and so did I, to a certain extent). This separation, however, did not preclude discussions about her family problems, as we see in the excerpt above, but informed narratives about constraints in her life.

In telling me about their lives, many young women referred to their educational trajectories. For these young women, education was not only a major part of their lives, it was also the instrument that held the promise of better futures (Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery, 2004; Mathew, 2016). The majority had pursued primary and secondary education at government schools. Many of them had studied at the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) run *Sarvodaya Vidyalaya* (*'sarvodaya'* translates to development or prosperity for all). Although the scope of this thesis does not allow for a full discussion of hierarchy of schools in India, it should be noted that, as expected, government schools have limited resources in terms of both teaching and support for students (see Arnold, 2018). This has created a supplementary system of private tuitions (Banerji, 2000) as well as low-fees private schools (Kingdon, 2017). In the lanes

and by-lanes of Khanpur and Dakshinpuri, those who have completed education to class X or XII commonly offer tuitions in various subjects. While these are usually 'affordable' for local residents, they are taken up at the cost of other expenses. Prachi, in the excerpt above, spoke about how her parents could not afford to send her to private school or tuitions. Such decisions in low-income families are also often determined by gender. Banerji (2000) writes that in Ambedkar Nagar (a resettlement colony in Dakshinpuri) –

> "…households follow complicated strategies to optimise schooling given the limited options available. One common strategy is to send the sons to a private school and the daughters to the local municipal school. Another strategy used by a number of families is to send the child to the municipal school but invest in tuitions at home, especially if the child is bright." (p.798)

A key distinction between government and private schools is the medium of instruction – while government schools are usually 'Hindi medium'[23], private schools offer 'English medium' education. The class difference between me and my respondents was very clearly marked by this distinction – while I had attended an English medium private school, they had all gone to Hindi medium schools. Since English is increasingly a requirement in the new service economy, English speaking courses, as the previous section discusses, are popular at skills training centres. In call centres, workers may have to speak on the phone in English; in cafés and shopping malls, customers are greeted and assisted in English; in offices, employees are aware that English is necessary to progress. Indeed, one of the respondents, Ranjini, a fast food worker, suggested that English can even be a social leveller –

> "…These days there's not much difference between *low* and *middle class*, everybody has money, everybody has phone. *Chhote log*, poor people, use the same things as *bade log*, big people. And with education, even with *government* education, everybody can speak *English*…Those who come from the village,

[23] The division between English-medium and Hindi-medium (or the medium of another Indian language) in education has been a topic of interest both in academic scholarship (see, for example, Mathew, 2016) and popular discourse (which cannot be fully discussed in the scope of this thesis). A popular 2017 movie *'Hindi-Medium'* highlighted issues of inequality, access, language, and social mobility in and through education. Commenting on a recent draft of the National Education Policy, the scholar Kancha Ilaiah has argued for dismantling the two-tier system of elite English and regional language schooling by making English the primary medium of instruction across all government schools (*Language Policy: Education in English Must Not be the Prerogative of Only the Elites*, June 2019, The Wire).

> they're different. They don't know how to speak *English*, their education is not so good…These days there's nothing in life other than *job* and studying…When I lived in the village, my nature, my style of talking was similar to villagers. Here it's changed, I talk differently. I learnt to use words in *English*. My style of talking changed. When I went to the village, I talked differently, they all said, oh she's only been gone for four days and she's changed. I said it's not like that. *Mummy* said we went outside because we wanted to change our children's nature so they can do better in life. If we stay like villagers, what's the point of that?"

While Ranjini felt that her urban life had afforded her opportunity to learn and speak English, allowing her to differentiate herself from 'villagers', other respondents were not so confident about their skills. They placed their discomfort in the lack of early training in English, as would be the case in private schools. Among Prachi, Chandni, and Sheela, who were all friends, Prachi was most confident about her English skills. She proudly told me she had taught herself English through reading novels. She also told me that Sheela, who she had worked with in the café, was not as confident in her English skills – "Sheela can't *pronounce English* very well so whenever someone comes who only talks in English, *she put me in front*." The lack of English skills was also noted as a major disadvantage by older women who I conducted supplementary interviews with. Nandita, a 30 year old care worker, who had previously worked at a call centre, told me that although she knows English, she is not comfortable speaking it –

> "I…whenever there are *interviews*…I always go. I keep trying to get ahead, whatever I can find better. They [the skills training manager] are saying there's an *interview* on Tuesday, so I said I'll come. It's a big deal to do interviews too. I've done at least 10-20 but the fear has still not gone. I don't know when it will go. I get a bit stuck with my *English*. I know how to say it but I can't say it. I get scared, so I start using Hindi. I understand what they're asking. They ask in *English*, I respond in Hindi. Just because of *English*, I'm a bit behind. I studied in a *government school*, at that time, *English* wasn't [prevalent] much…thankfully the kids can speak *English* well…"

Nandita saw not being able to speak English well enough as a reason for having been 'left behind' in the field of new services, and ultimately in the game of life. Nandita's feeling that she is 'stuck' because of her lack of English skills and relief that "…the kids

can speak English well" is not surprising. Many other respondents' narratives reiterated the concern with not only speaking English, but speaking English fluently and convincingly enough to gain and retain positions in the new service economy. Azam, Chin and Prakash's (2013) study based on the Indian Human Development Survey (IHDS) establishes a strong positive correlation between English language skills and earnings (also see, Shariff and Sharma, 2013). Their calculations found that hourly wages are on average "34 per cent higher for men who speak fluent English and 13 per cent higher for men who speak a little English relative to men who speak no English" (Azam, Chin and Prakash, 2013, p. 336). Although they have concerns about controlling variables for women (especially since women's participation in wage employment is much lower than men), they also found that "women who are fluent in English earn 22 per cent more relative to women with no English ability, and women who speak a little English earn 10 per cent more" (Azam, Chin and Prakash, 2013, p. 362)[24].

Inequalities of access to resources in schooling percolated into higher education too, with most respondents pursuing undergraduate degrees through open or distance learning. They had not considered applying to 'regular' college education, which would entail going to the college and attending classes every day. This decision was partly informed by being able to work while studying through distance learning. But when I probed further, more complex explanations emerged. Some respondents said they really did not think of regular college as an option, they did not know any girls in their neighbourhoods who had gone to college. Others noted that they had very little guidance from their schools and families about higher education. Pranjali, who was working as a financial assistant at an office and pursuing a distance learning degree in commerce, had not made an active choice as such about her subject of study –

> Me: "And how did you get into Commerce?"
>
> Pranjali: "*Commerce*? What do I tell you? I had no idea that there's *Arts, Commerce*, all of that. When I cleared class X, I was very confused, my *mind* was *blank*. People kept asking which *stream* are you going into. *Papa* said *science*,

[24] Analysis of a recent Lok Foundation and Oxford University sample survey shows that the ability to speak English is closely tied to the social variables of class, caste, gender, religion, and location (*In India, who speaks in English, and where*, May 2019, LiveMint). The findings that rich rather than poor, upper castes rather than scheduled castes or schedule tribes, men rather than women, Hindus and Christians rather than Muslims, and urban rather than rural residents are more likely to speak English may point towards the reproduction of inequalities in education and employment.

mummy said whatever you like, somebody said *arts*, somebody said *commerce*. But I didn't know what these things were! People would suggest taking one or the other but nobody told me what they are all about."

Prachi told me that although she wanted to go to a 'regular' college, there was a sense that that was meant for upper middle classes –

"From childhood, I wanted to study *regular* but everyone else thought where will they get nice clothes from to wear every day. I didn't think about all of that. I just wanted to study properly, I tried hard but it didn't happen, *I got really depressed at that time*. I belong to SC [Scheduled Caste] but our SC card didn't work. I still regret that to this day. Those who study regularly learn much more, participate in activities. When you go to *school* or *college* every day, it's different. You can't learn that much in one day a week in a big class, teachers just want to finish a *chapter* in a *class*. I just wanted to study properly, to get good marks, to do good work, then my family can still 'move up'. I wanted to become independent and support my family."

Prachi highlights colleges as securely middle class spaces, where you wear nice clothes every day, and if you cannot afford that, then you cannot belong. She also explains the unequal footing that they are placed on through distance learning. College education offers access to better learning resources as well as exposure to other activities that ultimately provide an advantage in the job market. Distance learning classes are usually held only once a week (Sundays) and my respondents were mostly unable to attend these because of either work or exhaustion. They took exams at the end of the year after either opting for private tuitions or studying on their own with the help of text books and 'notes' from students from previous years. Prachi insisted that if she studies any further, she will only do it in a 'regular' college –

Me: "After graduation, what do you want to do?"

Prachi: "If I do *postgraduation*, I want to do it *regular*. Then I can find something from it, I can get a *campus*, I could get an *internship*. *But then I blank out*, I don't know how to start, there's nobody around who can guide or help me. So I don't know how to apply, how to start…Anyway I'm still pursuing *graduation*. I think if I get *internship* in my area of interest, that would be good, that's what I want.

> That will help me figure out how to go about things. But I have no *contacts* and I'm not so outgoing that I can just go and find out. These days things happen through *contacts* only. I get depressed but then I tell myself to relax. I feel bad, I still haven't been able to help my family."

Prachi linked college education to employment opportunities that could enable her to help her family. In her study of fragmented middle class identities among White British women from working class backgrounds, Lawler (1999) finds two main narratives of class mobility – "...the narrative of the working-class girl set on the road to 'equal opportunities' through education; and the narrative of the working-class girl's leaving her class position through heterosexual romance and marriage" (p.7). The young women of this research also invested, both financially and emotionally, in education as a gateway to jobs in the new economy (marriage was not necessarily positioned in the same way, I discuss this more fully in Chapter 6). This was in contrast to many of my respondents' brothers who had dropped out of school. It should be noted that this does not suggest that families were more likely to invest in girls' education (as already discussed, families tend to favour boys in their efforts to optimise spending on education). Instead, I argue that lower middle class men have access to alternative models of aspiration that favour individual entrepreneurialism over education, regular employment, and hard work. While young women pointed to innovative abilities of their brothers – being able to fix things around the house, teach themselves how to use computer, or learn driving quickly – they never espoused such qualities in themselves (the innate qualities they established for themselves are discussed in the next section). The ability to be innovative in the face of scarcity is well known in India as the practice of 'jugaad'. Although 'jugaad' has become popular around the world as the Indian management speak, its accessibility is largely limited to men (Rai, Saigal and Thorat, 2015). This recalls Lawler's (1999) assessment of lack of positive identities available for working class women in contrast to the figure of the 'working-class boy made good'. These young women, as such, invest hope not in being able to make it big through innovation, but in being able to afford some mobility through struggle, perseverance, and hard work. They attain 'respectable' education and employment on the road to improve their own and their families' lives.

Prachi thought that regular college education could secure her an internship, preferably in either a law firm or a media office. This, she hoped, could help her establish a career in one of these (exclusively upper middle class) industries. While she had previously noted her family's weak financial circumstances (that meant that she could not enrol in a private school or for private tuitions), she further explained that her family also does not have the 'know-how' or the social capital (Bourdieu, 1977) that would enable her to find even an unpaid internship. Contrary to the suggestion that private jobs in the new economy are competitive (and hence open to all for fair play) as opposed to nepotistic government jobs of bygone days, Prachi points out that employment opportunities are still limited by who you know. In particular, employment opportunities where there is scope for progression, such as internships, are inaccessible without access to middle class networks. Although Prachi shows a good understanding of the game – campus placements, contacts, internships, networking – and wants to be able to help her family, she does not know how to proceed, she 'blanks out'. This 'blanking out' – not knowing what to do, not having resources to draw upon, not being able to visualise a future – that Prachi speaks about was replicated in other respondents' narratives as well. Pranjali, who had drifted into studying commerce, had some tentative ideas about her future but they seemed to dissipate even as she talked about them –

> Me: "What are your future plans?"
>
> Pranjali: "What I seriously want is to not live a life of *discipline*, 10-6 job every day, not the same life…I want to do different things, I like variety. There's this *course*, *event management*, I read about it. There are *wedding planners, event managers, party planning*…all this, I'm interested in this. I want different things…like *projects,* that you finish, how did it go…this is what I like, I don't know when this interest will be fulfilled…Then sometimes I think about staying and progressing in my current field, I keep changing my mind…I think if this is my background, I should stay in touch with that…Maybe I should just go into this…In *event management* you don't know. In this your salary is fixed…I don't have any other options anyway. Even if I want to leave, I can't."
>
> Me: "So you want to leave?"
>
> Pranjali: "No, I don't want to leave. I just want to do something better. You can't grow in just one *company*. It's a small firm."

The vagueness of these young women's futures, as well as the sense of drifting along in their present, recalls Atkinson's (2013) analysis of class habitus and future orientations (also see, Skeggs, 2004c). In the context of post-recession Britain, Atkinson (2013) shows that those with least resources are the least likely to grasp the future, that is, to feel that the future is under control. Although both Pranjali and Prachi refer to emerging urban jobs that are supposed to be drivers of upward mobility or 'ticket to middle class' (Rama *et al.*, 2015) – events, marketing, media – they retract these 'aspirations', instead expressing a sense of despondency about their situations. Indeed, as Fernandes (2000) notes, these "array of images which depict the urban middle classes as the primary beneficiaries of economic reform" (p.88) do not account for lived experiences. Young women's acute awareness of lack of capital – both economic and social – was matched by consciousness that their current jobs were not necessarily going to afford them mobility. Nandita, who is married and has two young children, was at the time the sole-earner in the family. She told me she is trying to make things 'better' for herself and her family through work but was frustrated with her slow progress –

> Me: "And then, you know, you're talking about getting 'better'…in what sense?"
>
> Nandita: "Like if we get our own *flat*. That would still be in the *middle.* But the *problems* we have right now will get better with that…if we have our own house. When you have your own house, you feel like you have something, it's worth something. But it feels impossible at the moment. Everything is so expensive…"

Notably, to be able to legitimately claim becoming 'better', Nandita relies on more substantial and durable accumulation of property, which given her economic conditions – unemployed husband, two school-going children – is impossible as far as she can see. This was the case with younger unmarried women too, who were keen to contribute their earnings towards helping their parents buy a house or at least rent a flat in a better area. Osella and Osella (1999) distinguish between the transience of fashion and style and the durability of property in perceiving and claiming social mobility. While some very limited cultural symbols of high class may be accessible in the form of fashion, phones, and lifestyle, that is, through transient consumption, the material resources required to be securely middle class are not accessible to these urban workers.

As a field that operates through résumés, interviews, English speaking, and so on, service work compels a shift in the habitus of lower middle class women. Although there are avenues for them to pursue the desired habitus – degrees through distance learning and skills through low-fees training courses – young women are aware that the habitus acquired through these routes is marred by 'lack'. In making deliberate changes to their habitus, young women reflected on their life histories, particularly lack of access to resources that can enable a smooth transition from schooling to higher education and eventually to employment. Their families not only lacked the economic capital to send them to English-medium schools, they also did not have the social capital to set out their paths to higher education and employment. Locked out of 'regular' colleges, campus recruitments, and internships, young women then faced 'tensions' and felt 'blank' as they made efforts to appear convincing in their roles as professionals. In the next section, I discuss how these shifts in habitus, the plastic habitus that is always lacking, compel young women's distancing or 'disidentification' from those around them.

'I don't talk to people in my gully': Disidentification and (non-)belonging

> Me: "But in your neighbourhood, do other girls go to work? What jobs are they doing?"
>
> Sheela: "Yes, they do. They're mostly working in offices. I've talked to one of them, she does *data entry* work in Nehru Place. I see her from time to time…I don't get to talk to many of them. Actually I don't talk to people in my *gully* [lane]. I don't like talking there. I only talk to those who talk about good things. I don't like gossip, that's what girls do, they talk about boys and I'm not interested."

Sheela was one of my earliest respondents – I had met her at *Cuppa n Cake,* where both she and Prachi worked. By frequenting the café often – and especially in the mornings when the manager was not around and very few customers came in – we developed a relationship that has lasted beyond my fieldwork. I came to recognise the regular customers in the café, including the 'peculiar' ones who Sheela and Prachi were wary of. We would exchange glances if the two old uncles, or the couple and their mother, or the curly-haired college student came in. Another student who was a regular customer was particularly a matter of discussion between Sheela and Prachi, perhaps because he was closest to them in age. They found him 'cute', joked about 'liking' him, and teased one

another when he came in. In contrast to this playfulness with Prachi, Sheela clearly told me that she does not interact with girls in her gully (lane) because she is not interested in boys and that is all they want to talk about.

On another occasion when I was in the café, on a particularly quiet day, we noticed students on the other side of the road. Sheela wondered why they were not coming into the café and Prachi promptly pointed out that they were buying cigarettes and smoking outside. This led to a discussion about student lifestyle. Prachi lamented that these students were wasting their time (and lives) smoking and drinking whereas if she had the opportunity (to go to a regular college), she would make the most of it. "Ma'am, do you smoke?", Prachi asked me all of a sudden. Before I could respond, Sheela exclaimed, "Of course not! Have you seen ma'am? She's so nice, she doesn't do all of these things!" While Sheela's rebuttal saved me having to explain myself, I was also intrigued by her dismissal of both lifestyles in her neighbourhood – the girls who gossip – and lifestyles of upper middle class students – the girls who smoke. In doing so, Sheela disidentified herself from these social locations.

Drawing on her study with workers in a BPO (business process outsourcing) centre outside Bangalore in India, Vijaykumar (2013) finds that young women "distinguish themselves both from their mothers' generation of confined, sheltered, rural housewives and the urban trope of the promiscuous call center girl" (p.779). She further suggests that they use 'flexible aspirations' as a symbolic resource that enables them to 'adjust' to the social locations of both the global Indian IT worker as well as the future respectable married woman. Vijaykumar's (2013) findings have resonance with my respondents' navigation of similar social locations. In the previous chapter, I discussed young women's rejection of housework and the status of housewife, particularly on the basis of their higher education. In this chapter, I am interested in exploring their distancing from more 'immediate' locations of neighbours, relatives, and families (rather than the previous generation). I ask – why and how is difference marked? In other words, what do these young women stand to gain from marking themselves out as different and how do they establish that difference?

As in the case of Sheela, other respondents expressed dislike for their 'middle class' neighbourhoods and neighbours, and insisted that they maintain an aloofness in their communities. They frowned upon 'street culture' – gossiping, sitting outside the house,

visiting neighbours, etc. These activities, as the previous chapter discusses, were seen as a waste of time. Their preference to not be like 'others', particularly other women, was then framed by the importance of 'productivity', whether through studies or employment. Among the mothers I conducted supplementary interviews with, women were similarly concerned about their children growing up in neighbourhoods that they did not see as desirable. They worried that if their children spent too much time in the neighbourhood, they would become like them. Nandita, for example, spoke about her efforts to improve the lives of her children. Nandita showed me her children's photos on her phone. She established that she herself grew up as different from her neighbours and attributed it to her mother having imbibed upper class culture from her employers, something that she was now passing on to her children –

> "I'll show you my children, we live in the *camp* [slum] but nobody can say they are *jhuggi* [slum] children. I've raised them well. Mainly *mummy*…she's always stayed with *bade log*, rich people, so by seeing them…so my children have always lived well. I'll show you my daughter…"

In trying to raise her children well, Nandita has decided to create distance between them and the neighbourhood, both physically, by containing them at home, and symbolically, by teaching them the 'right' behaviour –

> "I tell my *bhabhi* [sister-in-law] to get kids to stay at home. When they go out to play, they're going to learn swear words. Her son is young but he swears. My children have never done that. When they hear him, they say, '*Haw mummy*, he's saying bad things!' (laughs) I never let them leave the house…She just sends them out, go play outside. Keep them at home. What will they learn if they go outside? I try to keep them busy at home, I get *drawing book*, and *games*, etc. To get them to stay at home. I try all the time. Go to *school*, come back, rest, do your *homework*, go for *tuition*, in *extra time*, watch TV but stay at home, don't go outside."
>
> Me: "In the neighbourhood, there are all kinds of people…"
>
> Nandita: "Yes but it's not that if you live in a bad environment, you turn out bad. I've also lived here, I didn't learn any of these things. I don't shout or fight. So it's up to individuals."

Similar to other respondents' narratives, Nandita made several references to characteristics of their neighbourhood and those that inhabit these neighbourhoods – swearing, fighting, shouting, gossiping, and so on – that make them undesirable. Nandita frowned upon her sister-in-law's mothering practices and suggested that being actively involved as a mother and keeping children busy distracts them from the bad language and behaviours they may learn on the street. In doing so, she insisted that it is up to individuals to improve themselves, to be different from those around them, to transcend their circumstances – "…it's not that if you live in a bad environment, you turn out bad."

The possibility of being 'different' in spite of circumstances was emphasised by many of my respondents through various features – intelligence and interests, taste and style, and attitudes and behaviours. Prachi, who spoke English most fluently out of all of my respondents (and was admired, and at times, mocked by her friends for it), proudly told me that she has always had her head in the books, reading everything from Chetan Bhagat to Shakespeare. It was through reading that she had taught herself to speak English. This marked her as different not only from her neighbours, but also from her family. Both of Prachi's sisters, who she introduced me to, had had boyfriends in the past but Prachi insisted that she has never been interested in someone like that, instead focusing on improving her life. This romantic monasticism also extended, in some respondents' narratives, to rejection of feminine fashion – dressing up, wearing traditional clothes and jewellery, putting on makeup, and so on, although on occasion they dressed up together for weddings and parties[25]. However, changing comportment through clothes and make up (which I further discuss in next chapter) to enter the new service economy was not similarly frowned upon.

Jahanvi, who put on a black dress when she went to the mall to look for jobs, commented on her good looks and charm that helped her to build relationships with customers, ensuring that they returned to the café. In doing so, Jahanvi relied on her femininity, only half-joking that she did not want other women to join the café, preferring to reserve the attention of her (male) colleagues and customers for herself. Similarly, Chandni spoke about her 'high class' looks that differentiated her from other

[25] This has some limited resonances with studies based in the UK on women collectively engaging in feminine practices – such as, dressing up, going for 'night out', and drinking at clubs – that analyse these as acts of solidarity rather than merely ways of being desirable to men (see, for example, Skeggs, 1997, pp. 98–117; Nicholls, 2019, pp. 81–122).

girls in the neighbourhood. She suggested that her appearance could be deceptive, one could not tell where she came from by looking at her. She felt the need to come clean about her origins to her boyfriend at the time who was from a better-off family –

> "I told him [my boyfriend] everything about me, where I come from, where I belong to…I thought he might think the girl looks *smart*, her father might have a lot of money. I told him not to go by my looks. He used to take me out in his *car*…"

These reflections on 'difference' recall similar findings by Skeggs (1997) among white working class women in North-West England. Describing her long-standing desire to be different, one of her respondents, Mary says –

> Mary: "I had a long red skirt and a blouse and he said 'you look exquisitely elegant, you look totally different.' There was a girl here in a mini-skirt and a tight top and all the men were eyeing her and I said I should have worn my mini and boob tube to him and he says no, you're elegant…I like to look good…"
>
> Bev: "What's the image?"
>
> Mary : "I don't know I've always wanted to be different." (p.84)

Skeggs (1997) argues that in their definitiveness about who they do not want to be, these young women were distancing themselves from majoritarian discourses that pathologise working class women. Young women in the new service economy in Delhi find themselves amidst contestations over the subject position of the urban woman worker. As lower middle class women, while they are not working completely out of necessity, the 'respectability' of their semi-skilled service jobs is constantly under question, as noted in the previous chapter. By establishing themselves as different, they may distance themselves from the 'unproductive' activities of their neighbourhoods, and hence, secure their positions as respectable professionals. The distance is specifically established against other women in the neighbourhood – the women who let their children play outside, the women who only talk about boys, the women who do not engage themselves in education or study.

As young women develop their 'stylised self' (Skeggs, 1997; McNay, 2000) to establish themselves as professionals, they are also aware that they cannot completely 'assimilate' as we see in their narratives of 'lack' in the previous section. In contrast to

Abrahams and Ingram's (2013) students with 'chameleon habitus' who find ways to adjust to two fields, and indeed Vijaykumar's (2013) women with 'flexible aspirations', these young women workers express feeling like misfits in both their workplaces and communities or homes. Their complex liminal subjectivities can then be better understood through the concept of 'disidentification' – "…the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 11). The concept of disidentification has also been taken up by theorists of class in exploring the politics of self-identification of class, particularly in the context of changing (and disappearing) language of class (Savage, Silva and Warde, 2010; Skeggs, 2016). As neophyte workers, young women are navigating multiple 'dominant ideologies' – those in the field of work as well as those in their families and communities – engaging in a sort of 'double disidentification'. In the rifts created through this movement, their disidentification appears to be characterised by claims to their 'true' selves.

To return to Mary's quote above, I am drawn to her insistence that she has *always* wanted to be different, that is, this desire is not new or fleeting, it is part of who she is. Tellingly, although both Jahanvi and Chandni did not hesitate in talking about their good looks, they also carefully highlighted that it is their natural, rather than cultivated, attractiveness that has helped them position themselves in the new field of service work. They further went on to describe other 'innate' characteristics that give them an 'edge' over others. Jahanvi insisted – "But my mind is different, it wants to do everything. I like reading the person's psychology, I do that too when I'm standing at retail…I want to do everything..." Chandni also went on to explain that her difference is not limited to her superficial appearance, it runs deeper –

> "Since childhood, I've been brought up in a way that a girl from a good family [*achhe ghar se*] would be, from my *dress* to my behaviour to the way I talk. You must have seen in Dakshinpuri, children use abusive language, girls have this thing of 'this is my guy' [*mera banda*], there's all of that…but my family didn't bring me up like that."

As already discussed, to enter the unfamiliar field of new service work, these young women adopt plasticity of habitus, particularly through higher education and skills training. To extend the conceptualisation, I suggest that plasticity of habitus indicates

not only malleability of comportment but also the consciousness of its artifice, that is, plastic as pliable as well as synthetic. The anxiety about being 'impostors' in a 'bourgeois world' is noted by Lawler (1999) in her study with middle class women who came from working class backgrounds. She finds feelings of both pride and shame among these women – although they identified their 'lack' (of resources and capital) within their working class selves, traces of this lack trickled into their middle class selves, thus creating the possibility and anxiety of failure of being middle class. Lawler (1999) argues that it was through claiming "intelligence, knowledge and/or taste as features of their childhood selves" that they could establish their self as "always-already middle class" (p.9). Similarly, while Chandni and Jahanvi established their difference based on their looks, they felt the need to emphasise that this difference was more than just skin-deep or plastic.

Young women further established the depth of difference based on attitudes to women's education and employment. Mitali, one of my supplementary interviewees, had completed a graduate and postgraduate degree in Political Science as well as a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree in Political Science and Hindi. She had initially taught in a small school and then moved to a non-government organisation, where she was involved in mobilising families to send their children to school as well as in assisting families with getting their children admitted to local government schools. In contrast to Mitali's extensive higher education, her brothers had only studied to class XI level. Mitali distinguished herself from her immediate family, relying on the perception of outsiders –

> Mitali: "Yeah and I'm telling you, according to me. Like when I go outside, nobody says she's a *middle class* girl. When they see my family, they see it's a *middle class* family. One because our house is old, parents are not that educated, brothers are not that educated. Then they see the *personality* and behaviour…all of that."
>
> Me: "So if you're on your own…"
>
> Mitali: "Yes, it's my own experience. But my family's *problems*, I talk about them openly, I have no hesitation. It's better to face the truth."

Although Mitali creates distance between herself and her family based on others' perceptions, she also emphasises that she does not reject or shy away from recognition

of her family's problems. Indeed, her difference comes through her family's (and therefore her) struggles. Following young women's trajectory from education to employment, such distance from 'middle-classness' was also established through attitudes towards women's employment, whereby young women equated being 'high class' with being 'open minded' about women's employment (as noted in Chapter 1). Pranjali, who worked as a financial assistant in a small office, lived in the slum, JJ Camp, same as Prachi. When I asked her if she would consider herself middle class, she was not sure; she was not convinced that two or three categories of class were enough to label people. However, she did not hesitate in describing her neighbourhood as middle class because of the "old fashioned traditional way of thinking" –

> "…I can't call myself *middle class* but yes, the type of people and thinking…I come from the *camp* [slum], people there have an old fashioned traditional way of thinking. In my lane, there are very few girls who go out to work. In our neighbourhood, I'm one of the very few girls going to work. But things are changing, people are accepting it more. You've seen what *gents* these days are like, they don't work, girls are doing it…So nobody stops girls now, they think she'll get married, she should be able to earn a living for herself. My *mummy* says study and work for yourself, I don't want you to do anything for me, I just want you to have a secure life."

While Pranjali readily accepted the label of 'middle class' for her neighbourhood, she disidentified herself from it on the basis that "I'm one of the very few girls going to work". Reflecting on socio-economic changes, Pranjali suggested that things are changing even in her neighbourhood where men's unemployment is bringing about a shift in attitudes towards women's employment. Similarly, Meeta, a café worker, equated allowing women freedom to study and work with 'high class' thinking. In doing so, she distinguished between material and symbolic aspects of class. She thought her family's circumstances qualified them as middle class but that their thinking was not confined to middle-classness –

> Me: "Would your call your neighbourhood, your family middle class?"
>
> Meeta: "*Middle class*…hmm…yes, it is *middle class*, but my family's thinking is not *middle class*."

Me: "In what way?"

Meeta: "Like a lot of times I hear about they're saying this and that to their daughters. That kind of thing doesn't happen at my home. So, I think of my family's thinking as *high class*."

Women's work, in this way, has come to be linked to 'distinction' of class – while the material circumstances of a family might mean that they are lower middle class, they can 'rise above' their status by demonstrating 'progressive' thinking in their attitudes towards women and women's education, employment, and mobility. Further, respondents also suggested that women's participation in work could be transformative, enabling women to transcend both material and symbolic boundaries of their neighbourhoods –

Me: "And where you live, what are the families like, what kind of work are people doing?"

Nandita: "Mostly people work in houses…Some are very good. They have their own businesses, somebody has a *parlour*, somebody has a *DJ business*, somebody…does repairing. Very good people live here. You can't say that because we're in the slum, we're *'gae-gujre'* [destitute]. If you see their houses and where they work, no one can say this is where they come from. One of my friends, she has a *parlour* in the *market*. So expensive. This is a *hi-fi market*. Look at the house and then look at the *parlour*. You won't believe she comes from that house. When they leave the house, they make up such a good *personality*. No one can say…they completely transform. So, if somebody thinks, 'They live in the slum', that would be wrong to think. Because even in the *jhuggi* [slum], everyone is *hi-fi*."

Nandita implied that through work – a beauty parlour in this case – it is possible to transcend the boundaries of the neighbourhood. While this transcendence is based on appearance, it is not only skin-deep, it also involves transformation of the 'personality'. Nandita's observation about the woman who looks different when she leaves her house in the slum resonates with comments by Chandni, Jahanvi, and Mitali, all of whom suggested that they *looked like* they belong to higher class than their families and neighbours. These claims of fluidity of class emerge in dialectical relation to

employment – on the one hand, appearance of belonging to a higher class can facilitate entry into the new service economy, on the other hand, employment can offer the opportunity (and resources) for transformation. However, as the previous sections argue, this very employment can also put young women 'in their place' by exposing the plasticity or 'lack' of their habitus. Disidentification then emerges as a strategy that allows young women to stand in-between the possibilities of transformation and constraints in their lives. They distance themselves from their neighbourhoods, neighbours, and at times, even immediate families on the basis of 'innate' traits – looks, style, behaviour – to explain their movement into new service work and as a way to overcome the 'plasticity' or artifice of their habitus. These traits emerge through, rather than as separate from, the 'struggles' and 'tensions' in their lives. These narratives further highlight women's employment as a site where gender and class can be made and un-made. Further, they underscore "the ways in which certain subject positions (ways of being and ways of being recognized or acknowledged by others) – are discursively available for individuals to occupy" (Byrne, 2003, p. 31).

Conclusion

This chapter explores emerging subjectivities among young women workers entering new service employment. In particular, it draws attention to the process of becoming workers in the new economy, highlighting the incoherence and instability of workers' subjectivities. It specifically engages with women's own reflections on the mechanisms of becoming workers in the new economy. These reflections are positioned in relation to the sites where subjectivities are compelled and produced, the discourses that constrain and produce subjectivities, and strategies that define these subjectivities.

In order to enter service work that requires skills that they have not naturally acquired during their life course, whether through schooling or families, these young women make deliberate efforts to alter their comportment by taking courses in English, computers, and 'personality development'. While the respondents did not unquestioningly embrace the subject positions they were being compelled into – individualism, entrepreneurialism, aspiration – they attempted to naturalise the alterations to their habitus. However, the very deliberate nature of the acquisition of new habitus implies that they are always characterised by lack (Bourdieu, 1990). Even as they gain experience in the field, their 'lack' may manifest in the form of lack of

fluency in English, lack of confidence, and lack of contacts. I conceptualise these deliberate changes to habitus as 'plastic habitus', which is plastic not only because it is malleable but also because it is at the risk of being found out as synthetic or artificial.

To overcome the artifice or plasticity of their habitus, young women then relied on narratives of innate traits that have helped them enter the world of work despite the struggles they faced. These traits ranged from an unusual interest and excellence in studies, intuitive communication and people skills to good looks, obstinacy, street smartness, and so on. These innate selves are always defined through distance from 'others', particularly from women in their immediate surroundings, although they did not involve a repudiation of their material circumstances. Through discourses of 'productivity' and 'self-improvement', young women asserted that although they come from middle class backgrounds, they have traversed class boundaries. This dissimulation from middle-classness, I argue, cannot be adequately understood through the concepts of entrepreneurialism, individualism, or aspirations that are commonly deployed to define workers' subjectivities, particularly in the emerging service economy. These concepts do not capture the simultaneous making and un-making of gender and class that these young women's lived experiences reveal. Further, they do not account for workers' own contestations of these subject positions.

Disidentification (Skeggs, 1997, 2016; Muñoz, 1999) then offers an alternate way to understand the liminal positioning of these young women as in the middle of competing gendered narratives of compulsion of work and aspiration for work. While they cannot completely claim identification with the new service work they participate in, always aware of its exteriority or artifice, they also distance themselves from their families, neighbours, and neighbourhoods, thus only tenuously belonging in both spaces. Further, rather than merely mirroring 'elite self-representations' (Vijayakumar, 2013, p. 792) or aspiring to global identities (Brown, Scrase and Ganguly-Scrase, 2017), these young women are aware of and operate within their constraints. As a strategy that works both with and against dominant ideologies, disidentification encapsulates young women's varying interactions with the fields of work and family. Disidentification then provides a different frame of analysis that does not evaluate young women's narratives through dominant upper class discourses which presume that one is either upper class or desires to be (and can become) upper class.

As understood through disidentification, these young women's experiences present the complexities of the formations and contestations of gender and class at the site of women's work in urban India. As a site of both pleasure and injury for young women, employment both compels new workers' subjectivities, leading to adaptations in habitus, as well as emphasises lack and constraints. The simultaneous recognition of lack and efforts to naturalise the 'stylised self' lead to discomfort in both the fields of work and neighbourhoods or communities. It is through participation in employment as well as in order to participate in employment that young women position themselves as different from those around them. In the next chapter, I consider young women's experiences specifically in the workplace, particularly their navigation of respectability through management of corporeality, highlighting further cracks in the process of seeking distinction.

CHAPTER 5

‘That work wasn’t of my class’: Corporeality

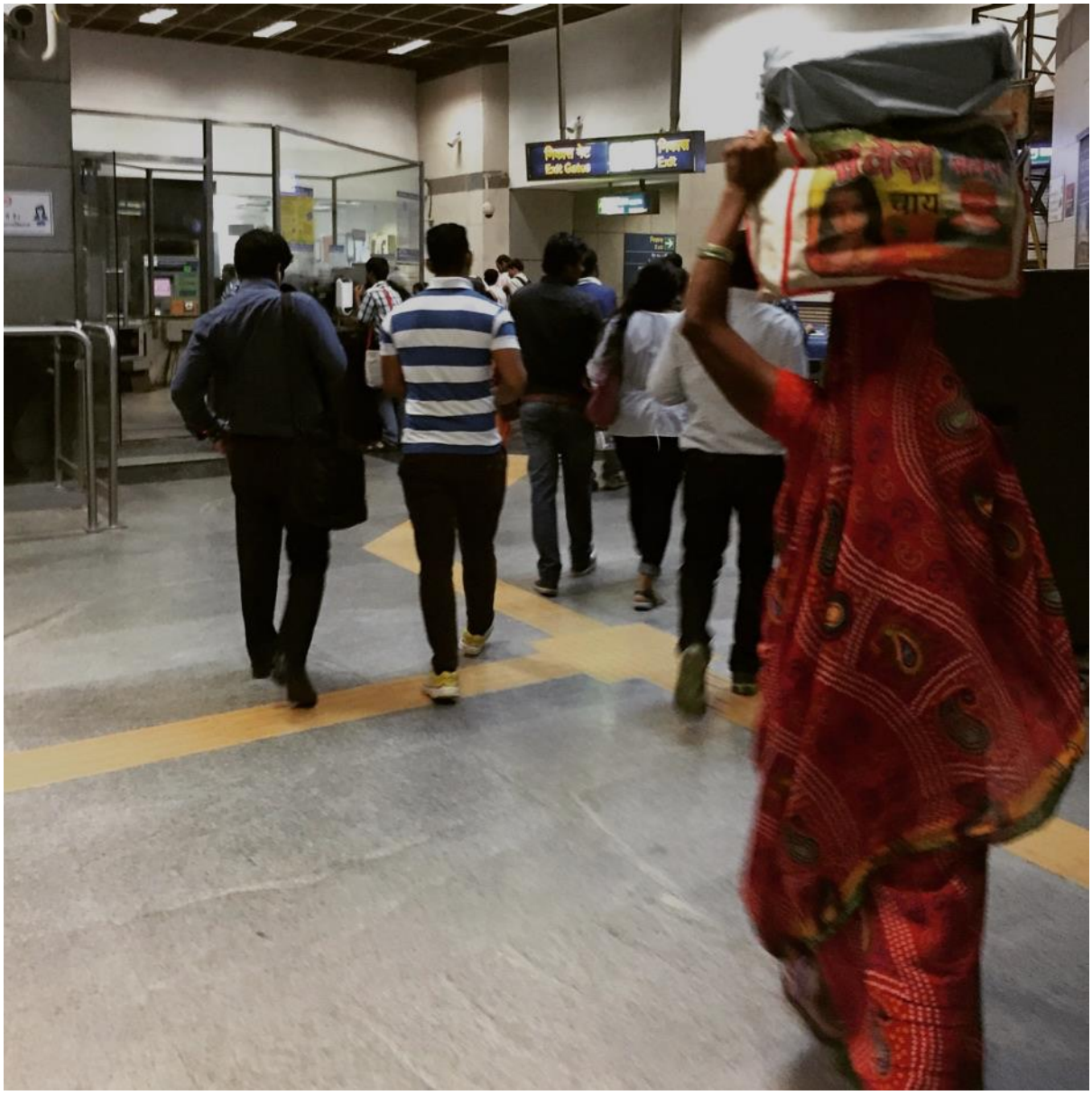

Image 7: Passengers of Delhi metro

Introduction

Prachi was one of my earliest and key respondents – when she quit work from *Cuppa n Cake* where I had met her, I hired her as my research assistant. She took on the role with enthusiasm and confidence – Prachi's contacts and insights were immensely helpful for my research and she enjoyed participating in research work with me. Prachi was at the time pursuing an undergraduate degree in Political Science (Hons.) She was interested in interning at either a law firm or a media house but felt there were very limited avenues since her family did not have the 'social capital' to enable this (as the previous chapter highlights). Prachi's father was unemployed while her mother was self-employed part-time as a masseuse. Previously, Prachi's mother had worked as a domestic worker – washing dishes, cleaning houses, and cooking – for many years. Prachi's first job in a boutique in South Delhi was secured through the family her mother used to work for.

Although Prachi was closely acquainted with paid domestic work, she was keen to distance herself from it. She was pursuing higher education, she had self-taught fluency in English (she told me through reading novels, particularly those by Chetan Bhagat, a popular Indian writer, but she could easily quote titles by Shakespeare too), and she had entered the bourgeoning service work of urban India. At the café, however, she told me, she was disappointed by the lack of sophistication among her colleagues. Contrasting it to the boutique she had worked in previously, she said the staff at the café addressed her using the informal 'you' – *'tu'* – rather than the formal and respectful form – *'aap'.* Further, she felt that the manager tried to take undue advantage of her commitment to work by asking her to do things that were not part of her job; she eventually put her foot down when the manager asked her to mop up the floors –

> "The other day the *housekeeper* didn't come. I was in the café with Sakshi. So we thought it's ok, I'll wash the dishes, no big deal. I called the *manager* to tell him, he got annoyed and said, 'What are you two girls doing there? You can do the work.' But I told him straight away, '*Sir*, I cannot do the mopping.' I've never even done cleaning at home…"

In this chapter, I broadly capture young women's *experiences* of participating in emerging service work in Delhi. Prachi's negotiation of work in the café – that I frame as management of her corporeality at work – is representative of other respondents'

narratives too. The economic shift from agriculture and industry to services in post-liberalisation India is also a cultural shift from the 'body' to the 'mind'. The degree of investment of bodies into work has long been recognised as an indicator of one's class – framed through the Cartesian mind/body dualism, the working classes labour using their bodies, while the middle and upper classes trade their minds for wages (Bahnisch, 2000). The mind/body dualism further manifests as the distinction between 'unskilled' labour of the body and 'skilled' labour of the mind.[26] The history of women workers' demand for 'equal pay for equal work' highlights the social construction of the notion of 'skill' (Steinberg, 1990), exposing how the associated processes of relegating women to 'low-skill' work *and* assigning low skill to work done by women maintain gender inequalities of labour (Acker, 1990; Sen, 1999). While, as the previous chapter shows, young women acquire higher education and a range of skills (computers, English speaking, customer management, and so on) to secure service jobs, the work they participate in at the lower end of the service economy is classified as 'semi-skilled' work. Following Bourdieu's (2004) formulation that "…bodily hexis is above all social signum" (p.584), their management of corporeality at work can be read as struggles over skill claims, and thus, 'respectability' in the new service economy.

In most cases, these young women's mothers had either not been in paid work or had worked as domestic workers, washing dishes, cooking, and cleaning in private houses. Yet, the women in my study emphatically rejected both these roles. The previous chapters explore young women's distancing from domesticity and the subject position of the housewife. In this chapter, I further show how young women established social distance from paid domestic work, done overwhelmingly by working class women in India, based on the rhetoric – 'Why would we do that when we're educated?!' – reiterating shifts in life expectations. Several respondents expressed fear of falling into domestic work and thus worked towards getting qualifications that would enable them to enter new service work. For the young lower middle class women of this research, emerging forms of service work – as retail professionals, baristas, beauty advisers – offer promise of 'respectable' labour, distinct from farm work, factory work, and

[26] Although outside the remit of this research, it is interesting to observe a return to work that primarily uses bodily labour, such as, brewing, pottery, sewing, etc. Arguably a response to "the anonymity of disembodied mass-production" (Thurnell-Read, 2014, p. 2), such skilled craft work values the tangibility of production and consumption. It disrupts the mind/body division, whereby the mind is equated with 'skill'.

domestic work that require heavier investment of manual labour. However, their experiences challenged the promise of 'skilled' and 'respectable' work, with employers often expecting them to perform labour that characterises domestic work, such as cleaning, mopping, and cooking. Women workers resisted such implications by refusing to do the work that they saw as outside the remit of their service jobs.

And yet, there were other forms of investments of their bodies in work that these young women accepted and/or actively participated in. Similar to findings in other studies of women service workers (Hochschild, 2003; Otis, 2012), they invested in their bodily appearance. This 'body work' (Gimlin, 2007; Kang, 2010) was performed through their clothing and uniforms as well as use of makeup. In 'dressing for the role', young women adapt their bodies to conform to the upper middle class milieu of their workplaces, recalling the 'plastic habitus' discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter further explores the anxieties over the *embodiment* of plastic habitus. However, besides 'body work', young women also invested their bodies through enduring exhaustion and injuries (including sexual harassment) that occurred during the course of work. I use the terms 'exhaustion' and 'injuries' here to refer to the limits or 'glitches' – "an interruption amid a transition" (Berlant, 2007, p. 198) – of the body. I understand exhaustion as depletion of the body's resources that necessitates rest for recovery and injuries as harm to the body's resources that requires attention beyond rest. I particularly pay attention to what Berlant (2011) calls the "costs of adjustments" (p.209) for the reproduction of labour. Given that women have traditionally had the primary responsibility for reproduction of labour through caring, what are the implications of their participation in work? The topic of exhaustion and injuries is usually relegated to factory work and remains underexplored in service work. This has particularly been the case because of the turn to conceptualisations of new forms of labour in services, such as, affective, emotional, and intimate labour (Hochschild 2003; Boris and Parreñas 2010). While engaging with these emerging concepts, I reiterate the need for attention to workers' bodies[27]. This centralising of corporeality is not an

[27] Although there is emerging sociological scholarship on 'body work' or work that involves labouring on one's own or others' bodies (Lawler 1991; Gimlin 2007; Kang 2010; Wolkowitz *et al.* 2013), it is usually limited to 'body contact' services, such as sex work, beauty work, or care work. I show that even in services where body contact is not the main form of labour, the body is engaged in significant ways by workers to negotiate their position at work.

attempt towards a more 'real' or material portrayal of these young women's experiences of work, instead it follows the argument that "…body/work nexus is crucial to the organisation and experience of work relations" (Wolkowitz, 2006, p. 1).

The chapter questions why young women (often successfully) refused to perform tasks that resembled domestic work but did not resist (often debilitating) exhaustion and injuries incurred through work? It is structured as follows – first, I will explore issues of gender and class in workers' refusal to perform manual labour, especially tasks with semblance to domestic work. Second, I present young women's narratives about work upon their bodies to negotiate belonging in (work)spaces. Finally, I draw attention to the exhaustion and injuries that young women incurred during work. I examine these narratives to show that while young women resist manual labour associated with domestic work (and are particularly resistant to such implication by their employers), they invest their bodies into work through 'body/appearance work' (Gimlin, 2007) as well as through enduring exhaustion and injuries. I argue that these young women workers' positioning of their bodies at work demonstrates the attachment to as well as costs of seeking 'distinction' through their labour.

'Are we servants?!': Respectability in service work

> Chandni: "…you know on TV they show, girls in *South India*, even if they're from rich families, they get sent to wash dishes in *kothi* [big houses]. My mother used to say I'll send you to do that, so I had that fear […if I didn't do well in exams]. I didn't want that to happen to me. So somehow I did my exams."

Chandni's first job, at the age of 16, was at a call centre. Unlike other respondents, Chandni started working *before* finishing class XII. Although she used to be studious before – "I had this reputation, even if I did something wrong, the teacher wouldn't believe I've done it" – she went through a 'rebellious' phase in class XII, bunking classes and avoiding studies. With eight hours a day at the call centre, she found it difficult to concentrate and prepare for her exams. Her father, who was unhappy that she had started working, told her – "…if you fail, *ghar pe baitha doonga,* I'll make you stay at home." Her mother, who was also worried that Chandni might fail her exams, threatened her with sending her to do domestic work in *kothis* (big houses). When Chandni shared this threat and the resultant fear with me, she laughed it away – of course, her family was not going to send her into domestic work! Nevertheless, her

familiarity with domestic work – other women in her neighbourhood as well as her friends' mothers were domestic workers – turned it into a compelling threat. Chandni also referred to media portrayals of domestic workers as women who have failed in life, whether in education, marriage, or other personal circumstances[28]. Chandni's escape from domestic work through education was reiterated by several respondents and highlights emerging valuations of labour, along the grain lines of gender and class, among the tenuously located lower middle classes in India. It further evidences the significance of women's work as a site for formations of class and gender in urban India.

In the previous chapters, I discussed how young women entering service work distance themselves from their homes and neighbourhoods. They claimed, through their higher levels of education, that they get bored 'sitting at home' and showed unwillingness to participate in the neighbourhood culture of gossip, conflict, and whiling away time. While young women clearly expressed desire to work as an alternative to domesticity, it is important to explore what *kind of work* they seek to enter. It is not the case that they enter voluntary work to simply kill time (although they did enrol in short-term skills training courses to that end when in-between jobs or in-between schooling and employment). They also do not enter the kind of work their parents, especially their mothers, had done. Many young women's mothers had been paid domestic workers but they did not consider this an option for themselves, instead entering new service work through their acquisition of new skills. Indeed, in some cases, by finding service employment, these young women 'relieved' their mothers of domestic work (further discussed in the following chapter), equating the manual labour of domestic work with necessity. The National Domestic Workers' Movement in India states that "The number of domestic workers in India range from official estimates of 4.2 million to unofficial estimates of more than 50 million", the majority of whom are girls and women[29]. In their ethnographic study of domestic work in Kolkata, India, Ray and Qayum (2009) use the concept of 'servitude' to capture the normalisation of subordination, dependency, and inequality that defines the relationship between domestic workers and their employers

[28] It is not uncommon to come across media depictions (in films and television series) of (middle class) women being insulted or treated badly – usually women lower down in the family hierarchy, such as, step daughter, daughter-in-law, unmarried sister-in-law – by being made to do all the housework since it is work that would otherwise be done by 'servants'.

[29] For more information, see National Domestic Workers' Movement.

(also see, Sen and Sengupta, 2016) [30]. It is precisely this 'servitude' that neophyte service workers attempted to distinguish themselves from by resisting tasks that resembled domestic work.

In her study of inequalities in primary schools in London, Reay (1995) notes how upper/middle class students saw cleaning as work that cleaners are employed to do and thus *they* don't have to do. The working class students on the other hand were not able to establish this 'social distance' and involved themselves in cleaning in classrooms. But interestingly, the young women in my study, while closely acquainted with domestic work, actively *create* social distance from it in their service jobs. I suggest that this reflects their liminal position – although they are more educated than the previous generation, the possibility of being compelled to rely on domestic work for sustenance is still tactile. The *creation* of distance from domestic work demonstrates the reflexivity and deliberate changing of habitus to seek 'distinction' through their labour in the rapidly growing service economy. The need to distance themselves from domestic work, however, did not simply conclude by entering service work. While women gained various skills at training centres, they were aware of the futility of these skills too. They complained that the jobs these centres matched them with often did not relate to the courses they had enrolled for. For example, Sarita commented on the computer course that she had enrolled in at *Pehel* but did not complete, instead taking up the café job when it came along –

> "It was a *computer course*…but they don't get many *jobs*. The thing is if somebody is doing a *computer course*, they should tell them about computer related jobs, not about *retail*. Why would somebody do a *computer course* then? That's the

[30] In July 2017, a luxury high rise apartment complex in Noida (a planned suburban city near Delhi) called 'Mahagun Moderne' came into news for what many termed 'class war' or 'class chasm' between employers and domestic workers (see, for example, *Routine abuse of Delhi's maids laid bare as class divide spills into violence*, July 2017, The Guardian; *In Noida, a riot-like situation over a domestic worker puts the focus on India's bitter class chasm*, July 2017, Scroll.in). A young domestic worker, Zohra Bibi, alleged that she had been attacked by her employer. When she did not return home, her family and neighbours stormed the apartment complex to search for her and were driven out by security guards and subsequently police. Zohra Bibi's employer made a counter-allegation of theft. This spilling over of anger resulted in some discussion about unfair treatment of domestic workers but ultimately only led to the police demolishing the 'illegal' slum settlement where Zohra Bibi and other domestic workers lived near the plush Mahagun Moderne.

problem there. This didn't sit right with me. Like *call centre* jobs. This was stupid…Mostly students there join because they want a *computer job*."[31]

Their reflections on the dissonance between skills and work highlight the gap between expectations and chances for young women entering the service economy. The previous chapter discussed the 'lack' that young women encountered in jobs that expected them to inhabit the unfamiliar upper middle class habitus through English speaking, body language, and behaviour. However, importantly, reflection on this 'plastic habitus' was not only inward looking. Young women also identified 'lack' in the work they were engaged in, particularly in the difference between the *illusion* and *reality* of jobs in the new service economy. These narratives importantly highlight the contested nature of the process of seeking 'distinction'. While young women expressed desire to be employed in the new economy, they also criticised it for not meeting their expected standards. Prachi, who attended 10 days of training prior to starting work at *Cuppa n Cake,* reflected on the artifice constructed by employers –

"…It was so formal in the training. *Shirt, pant, black shoes, socks, belt*…*I was like what the hell are you trying to do.* It's only Rs.7000 [GBP 70] salary anyway. Chandni also said it's so *professional* in the *training*, neighbours think we're going to a good *job*, then we go back to our *aukat* [status] …On the *job*, nobody even speaks *English*…"

As Prachi elaborated, this dissonance was experienced in terms of class – in the case of the café she worked at, although employers required her to be a 'professional', to speak English, and dress formally, as one would be expected to do in a white collar job, once at the café, the illusion of professionalism was exposed. Prachi's account at the beginning of this chapter also showed that she was unhappy with the lack of sophistication among her colleagues – let alone speak English, they talked to her using *'tu'*, the informal form of 'you'. Chandni had a similar experience when she switched from work in a call centre to *Cuppa n Cake*. She eventually quit that job for a host of reasons (discussed further in

[31] The desire for 'computer jobs' was expressed by several respondents and indicates that young women regard technology as holding promise of 'respectable' work, perhaps since it mediates distance from bodily labour. This is a potential area for future research, particularly in the context of the debates over technology and the future of work (see Autor, 2015; Wajcman, 2017).

the next chapter) but she told me that she was not satisfied with the work from the first day because it was not of her 'class' –

> Chandni: "…I didn't know anything about the *café*. I went for the *interview*. You know if you go for the *interview*, they do it so well, you'd think it's a really big *company*. My *interview* was all in *English*, they asked for previous six months experience. Then they slowly switched to Hindi, asked about salary expectations and working hours…I was also thinking about benefitting the *company*, but when I joined, the work turned out to be something else. It wasn't of my *class*, I couldn't do it."
> Me: "What did you not like?"
> Chandni: "We were serving, clearing tables…I thought it would be *kitchen work*, *customer management*, till operation…that would be fine, I didn't think it would be *servicing* too, like *hotel* work would be done by those who can't do anything else. I'm studying. *Mamma, papa*, everyone else in my family is educated."

The illusion of skills in service work, Chandni suggested, was set up by starting the interview in English. But contrary to her expectations, it turned out to be 'hotel work' that wasn't of her 'class'. Chandni positioned these activities against the kind of work she expected to do – kitchen work, customer management, and till operation. The 'kitchen work' in the café, it should be noted, mostly involved preparing coffee and grilling sandwiches. The 'professional' nature of this kitchen work – that they are provided training for – makes it distinct from the cooking that may be involved in 'unskilled' domestic work in private households. Further, although Chandni claimed her parents are 'educated', she was the most qualified in her family. Her mother had only primary education, her father had studied to class XII level and was unemployed throughout the duration of my fieldwork. Nevertheless, Chandni suggested that her family is 'open minded' in a not-middle-class way. By rejecting unskilled manual labour – serving, clearing tables, washing dishes – she then established distance from working-classness. Cleaning specifically is a contested subject in India with strong class and caste associations. Cleaning, with connotations of 'dirt' and 'pollution', has traditionally been assigned to the lowest castes. However, for the respondents of this study, evocations of

class and gender, rather than caste were stronger, particularly with reference to the frame of domestic work.[32]

Chandni's resistance to 'serving tables' and willingness to do 'kitchen work' was influenced by ideas of 'skill' and 'professionalism'. While young women often moved from one low-paid job to another, some of them did develop attachment to their work precisely through the notions of 'skill' and 'professionalism'. Jahanvi, who had worked at *Donut Time* before moving to *Chai & Chat* in the Select Citywalk mall, was proud of herself for quickly learning how to prepare doughnuts with the right toppings. While we chatted over tea in her house, Jahanvi's neighbour Soniya stopped by. In general conversation about employment, Soniya told us that she had quit her job at a fast food chain and had instead enrolled for a course in fashion designing. Similar to Chandni, she told us that the work at the fast food café did not meet her expectations –

> "I didn't like the work. I'm now doing a *fashion designing course*. There was a lot of *senior-junior* there, and we were supposed to serve customers at the table, are we servants [*naukar*] who will *serve* at the table? It was weird."

Soniya expressed dislike for work hierarchies – she entered service work as a professional on the basis of her higher education. She, therefore, expected to work with 'colleagues', rather than be placed at the bottom of the ladder as the new entrant in the café. Further, she resisted serving customers at tables – while Chandni referred to this as 'hotel work', Soniya distanced herself from the position of the 'servant'. Besides pursuing a course in fashion designing, Soniya was also providing private tuitions to younger students in the neighbourhood, thus, still contributing an income towards her family. Very much dressed the part in a silver sequinned top, blue jeans, and red lipstick, Soniya hoped that she could eventually find work as a fashion designer where she would be her own boss. This resistance was more difficult for women who worked in private, rather than the public spaces of cafés, call centres, malls, and offices. The young women cab drivers, who I conducted supplementary interviews with, were very conscious of this differentiation. Breaking into a traditionally men's field, they spoke of the anxieties as

[32] To expand on this argument, managers never asked women workers to clean the café toilets, work reserved for the lowest caste in India. Cafés employed staff specifically for this work. Instead, the cleaning work that Prachi's, Chandni's, and other respondents' accounts refer to includes washing dishes, wiping tables, and at times mopping, activities that are characteristic of domestic work done predominantly by women. This strict division of tasks highlights the significance and durability of caste in modern workplaces.

well as pride they felt in their professional identity. However, when working for clients and their families, they experienced implication into domestic work routinely as Lalita elaborates –

> "In the beginning, they didn't ask me for any *driving*, they asked me for small things here and there, get bread from the shop opposite, get this, get that. These are small things, we can do them. Then he asked me to clean the table, so they started adding on work. I felt they were old people, I can help them. When it got too much, I told Pooja ma'am. When they had filled in the *registration form*, they had already said that she has *asthma* and can't walk around too much, so the driver will have to assist her. And since it's *ladies driver* they expected me to be friendly. When I told Pooja ma'am, she said when you're in their house, they treat you like a family member, don't they?…She said at home, we'd help our elders, so you should too."

Lalita emphasised that although she was hired as a driver, she was not allowed to use the car when running errands for the family, she was instead made to walk everywhere. Reserving the car for use only for themselves may have been a strategy on the employer's part to keep Lalita 'in her place'. Quite tellingly, when Lalita protested, her manager (at the cab company) dismissed her complaint by reiterating the paternalistic relationship between her and her employer - "…they treat you like a family member, don't they?" Lalita suggested that the work expectations placed on her were specifically gendered, that she was asked to help around the house with cooking (this involved an incident where she was blamed for the food not being well cooked as well as being asked to cook when their maid went on leave) and caring (she was expected to assist an older woman who used a wheelchair) only because she is a 'ladies driver' (see Chambers and Ansari, 2018 for further discussion on co-optation of women into domestic labour). The work that Lalita was asked to do took over her role as the driver; she described it as - "Yeah, it was like the house servant, all the work…"

Anisha, also a driver, who I interviewed at the same time as Lalita, had had similar experiences. She called Lalita 'naive' for putting up with housework for as long as she did, Anisha was much more conscious of the employer's efforts to implicate her in housework from the beginning –

> "This has happened with me once too. When I went on my first job, she was a *foreigner*, she had parrots and other birds as pets. She said she was going away for 2-3 days – she was in Defence Colony – she said come in the morning and give food and water to the birds. But it's not my work, my work is to drive a car, not to feed chicks! So I said no, *ma'am*, this is not my work. When you're not here, if something goes missing, you'll think the *driver* was coming in. So I told her I can't do it, feeding chicks is not my work, you should have a servant for that. Soon after that, I was moved from there. I never did housework, whether they keep me or not. If you do it once, they'll ask you again, then it will become a daily thing."

Anisha's refusal to take care of the house pets in her employer's absence was marked by her resistance to housework – "I never did housework, whether they keep me or not", as well as by anxiety about being accused of stealing – "When you're not here, if something goes missing, you'll think the driver was coming in." This anxiety was also expressed by Lalita and, to a certain extent, by café workers (in the case of café workers, this mostly involved suspicion when manager's calculations of sales and cash at the till at the end of the day did not add up). The term 'servant' – used by Lalita, Anisha, and Soniya – is significant here and reiterates the master-servant model that characterises domestic work in India (Ray and Qayum, 2009). According to the International Labour Organisation (2017) –

> "Their [domestic workers'] work may include tasks such as cleaning the house, cooking, washing and ironing clothes, taking care of children, or elderly or sick members of a family, gardening, guarding the house, driving for the family, and even taking care of household pets."

While the ILO acknowledges the gender divide in these tasks – male domestic workers are most often drivers, gardeners, security guards – it is not fully explored. There are significant differences between jobs involving cleaning and caring (traditionally women's work) and those involving 'skills' such as driving and security. Those in latter jobs are often paid more, may wear uniforms, and may have a more formal relationship with the employer. Servitude suggests an inferior position without any scope for escape – in contrast, Lalita and Anisha eventually changed employers, insisting that they wanted to drive and not be domestic workers; Soniya was also able to quit her job and enrol for a fashion designing course.

What are the motivations for and implications of these young women's refusal to partake in 'unskilled' manual labour, particularly in domestic work that millions of women in India are engaged in and that they had close proximity to through their mothers and communities? As lower middle class women, the transition from domestic work, that one engages in because of necessity, to new service work, that is discursively constructed as 'skilled' and 'aspirational', is characterised by multifarious anxieties. As the previous chapters discuss, young women's entry into employment was subject to scrutiny – families discouraged them from entering employment, fathers refused to accept their daughters' salaries, and neighbours commented on women's late return to home. It is, therefore, not surprising that the *kind* of employment young women take up as well as the tasks they perform in their jobs is crucial to establishing respectability. In her study of White working class women in North-West England, Skeggs (1997) argues that –

> "Respectability is usually the concern of those who are not seen to have it. Respectability would not be of concern here, if the working classes (Black and White) had not consistently been classified as dangerous, polluting, threatening, revolutionary, pathological and without respect. It would not be something to desire, to prove and to achieve, if it had not been seen to be a property of 'others', those who were valued and legitimated." (p.1)

In a changing socio-economic context, where lower middle class women have access to semi-skilled work in the new service economy, these specific employment opportunities have come to stand for claiming middle-classness, as previous chapters argue. This section particularly draws attention to how young women workers' bodies are instrumental in navigating value and legitimacy in relation to their employment in new service professions. As educated women, they expect skilled work when they enter service work; customer management, till operation, and generally tasks that involve using a computer are desirable. These kinds of desirable work do not primarily depend upon the body for labour as opposed to tasks that have semblance to domestic work, such as washing dishes, mopping floors, clearing tables, etc. In rejecting the latter, these young women are as such claiming respectability by distancing their bodies from their work. This distance between the body and the work is however also under constant

threat of being undermined by employers, and therefore, also under constant negotiation.

'She wears pants and shirts to work': Becoming the working woman

In initial days of fieldwork, I got in touch with a feminist non-government organisation that, at the time, was running literacy classes for school drop-outs in the neighbourhood of Khanpur. I attended some of the classes and interacted with the young girls who were regular participants in these classes. One day, the teacher, Aradhna, who I became friends with, asked me to speak to the girls about my research. I started describing my interest in women's participation in new service work and mentioned that I would like to meet women who are employed in malls, cafés, offices, etc. One of the girls, who were of school-going age, mentioned that her elder sister, Jahanvi, works in Select Citywalk mall. Another one quickly quipped – "She wears pants and shirt to work, right?" Among the girls, this expression was more a sentiment of admiration than judgment. The job in the mall, all the girls agreed, requires quite a makeover – women of Khanpur and Dakshinpuri change their bodily comportment to *become* professional working women.

After the class, I accompanied Aradhna to a *dosa* stall for snacks and sweets, and over food we had a wide-ranging discussion about Khanpur, women's work, and gender equality. Aradhna had been working in Khanpur and Dakshinpuri for almost six months by that time. Part of her job was to mobilise families in the area to send their daughters who had dropped out of school for literacy classes. Through this door-to-door mobilisation, Aradhna had gained extensive knowledge of the neighbourhood. She told me that men in the area are mostly self-employed as electricians, plumbers, auto-drivers while women work as domestic help and cooks in private households. The average family income is around Rs.15,000 (GBP 150) per month. This job profile for women seems to be changing though, she added, with younger women choosing other professions, such as cafés, call centres, malls. Aradhna said you can tell by the way young women dress up if they work in a mall. They wear Western clothes and makeup; they try to make themselves look presentable and sophisticated. And other young women in the area learn from and emulate them. It is not uncommon to hear women talk about dressing up, drinking, and going to discos.

Aradhna also told me she had a friend who used to work in event management, putting on shows at malls. Such events often hire women to promote products and services.

These women, Aradhna said, are *used as bodies* – they are dolled up with lots of makeup and wear dresses which are rented out by the event management company. They are not paid per hour but according to who performed best and attracted most customers, so they could earn anything from very little to a substantial amount for a few hours. Aradhna seemed critical of this work, she said she does not like the idea of women's bodies being used to sell products/services and being evaluated against each other. Chandni had also, in our conversations, made reference to ad hoc events and promotions jobs – she told me when we were hanging out at the mall one day that she had recently been offered such a job but when she went there she discovered it was a "*B-grade event*" and they had employed "*B-grade* girls".

Aradhna's and Chandni's reflections on emerging forms of work, particularly where women are desirable, are emblematic of the pressures women's bodies are subjected to in the new economy, resulting in anxieties over navigating corporeality in workplaces. In theorising 'emotional work' as exchange of emotions for wages, particularly in the emergent services economy, Hochschild (2003) considers the body as an *instrument* for emotions, such that the management of feelings is displayed through "publicly observable facial and bodily display" (p.7). Building on this, Otis (2012) notes in the case of workers in a Beijing luxury hotel, "The stylized bodily labor of service employees constitutes a resource used to appeal to customers' class and gender expectations and aspirations" (p.9). In the spaces of cafés and malls in Delhi, where workers come into close contact with upper middle class customers, the economy of emotions is pervasive. When customers walk into cafés and shopping malls, the workers' emotions become an integral part of the sellable products. Greetings in English – 'Good morning, ma'am/sir' – are always accompanied by smiles. We can recall Prachi's complaint, "I had to keep a *plastic smile* on the whole day…", which she asserted was in contrast to how she felt while working there. In moving beyond the display of emotions, I consider the display of workers' bodies in itself as an integral part of service labour. Otis (2012) suggests –

> 'To fully appreciate the centrality of the body in service labor, then, we must understand the body's plasticity, the mechanisms through which the body expresses its social, organizational, and historical location as well as the agency of the body and its material capacities." (p.15)

Women in service work, as the previous section shows, negotiate their tasks at work to maintain distance between their bodies and their labour. This distancing is a form of resistance to injurious connotations of class and gender, particularly those related to domestic work, that become sedimented in the body. In this section, I focus on women's attempts to alter their bodily comportment, to rid themselves of those sediments, through two forms of body 'plasticity' – clothing/uniforms and makeup.

Young women's appearance – crafted through clothing/uniforms and makeup – is important for their claims to 'professionalism' but can also lead to increased scrutiny by families and neighbours. Women who were employed in cafés and malls were distinctly marked as such through their uniforms. At *Cuppa n Cake* in Chittranjan Park, Prachi's and Sheela's uniform included t-shirts, trousers, and caps, the same as their male colleagues, but different from the managers' uniform. Interestingly, contrary to Holliday and Thompson's (2001) assertion that "Uniforms or dark suits…are designed to invisibilise the bodies of both men and women and become compulsory attire, formally or informally, for this very reason" (p.117), young women workers experienced their bodies as hyper-visible through their uniforms. To return to the earlier frame of reference, the work that these young women distance themselves from – domestic work – does not require uniforms or professional clothing[33]. Indeed, uniforms have previously been associated with jobs done predominantly by men, such as, drivers and security guards. For these young women, thus, uniforms signal distinction, especially that of gender. This particularly emerged in supplementary interviews with women who were employed as drivers. Sushma, a driver, described her work to me as follows – "There's also self-respect in this work. I wear this *uniform*, I know no one will say, it's a *lady*, they'll say it's a *driver*." This donning of the uniform for Sushma to a certain extent allowed erasure of her gender, which, in this particular case, may be seen to be in conflict with her profession.

However, uniforms were also fraught with anxieties – while the young girls at the literacy classes admiringly noted that women who work at the mall wear pants and shirts, families and neighbours were usually not so accepting. On the occasions when I hung out with Prachi and Sheela after they finished work, both of them changed out of

[33] In some countries in Latin America, domestic workers wear uniforms and may resent their 'branding' as domestic workers through their clothing (see discussion in Casanova, 2013 in the context of domestic work in Ecuador).

their uniforms and dressed up in jeans and t-shirt in the café toilet (there were no changing or staff rooms). They usually changed into their uniforms at work, thus, avoiding walking in their own neighbourhoods in work clothes. Some women drivers also expressed discomfort in uniforms. While they were used to wearing 'traditional' clothing of tunic, trousers, and scarf or saree, as drivers they were given only tunics and trousers. The absence of a scarf to cover their heads and chest was noted by one of the drivers during a lunch break – she said she was slowly getting used to it but she had initially found it difficult to emerge from her veil and to don this uniform, just as she had struggled with becoming a professional working woman[34]. She described her uniform as symbolic of transformations in her life and labour.

Among young women who were not required to wear uniforms (mostly office workers) and those who were quick to shed their uniforms at the end of the work day, other considerations of clothing and appearance emerged[35]. As we chatted over *momos* in the CR Park market after Prachi and Sheela finished work one day, Prachi repeatedly told me that she likes Western clothes (that is, jeans and t-shirt). She made other references to the 'West' too – Western films and TV shows are more realistic, Western lifestyle is better because people don't interfere, Western countries are cleaner, and so on. Office workers who were not required to wear uniforms too reiterated preference for 'Western' wear. Even though jeans and tops were ubiquitous in the lanes of Dakshinpuri and Khanpur, their 'newness' was evident in young women's deliberations over their clothing beyond the workplace. Chandni, who had worked in various workplaces, including in call centres and offices where she was not required to wear a uniform, often talked about her appearance. Her desire to be more 'sophisticated' seemed to be guided by her then boyfriend who belonged to a slightly higher income family. The class

[34] On one occasion, I witnessed Durga, the manager responsible for the maintenance of cabs (including dealing with accidents and rescue), berating a driver for wearing a *dupatta* (scarf) - "This is not part of your uniform." She then went on to discuss with a group of drivers how women's bodies (and particularly certain body parts, such as breasts) are assigned shame and therefore expected to be covered up. "Are you ashamed of your bodies?" she asked rhetorically as drivers either giggled or nodded.

[35] As a researcher with considerable class difference from my respondents, I was quite conscious of my appearance too, particularly my clothes and accessories. During fieldwork, as I met my respondents in different spaces – shopping malls, their homes, and only once at my home – I paid attention to the belonging (and non-belonging) of bodies, or in other words, the "lived spatiality of the body" (Charlesworth, 1999, p. 17). In food courts in shopping malls, my respondents hesitated to accompany me to the till to place the order. In their homes, they tried to make me comfortable. I felt anonymous in malls but on the streets of Khanpur and Dakshinpuri, I stuck out as 'not one of them'.

difference between them was clearly a source of anxiety for Chandni but she expressed it as confidence that she can become 'better' through her association with him (and his social circle) –

> "He [my boyfriend] just comments on my look a bit, he says I wear bad colour combinations, he wants me to wear better clothes…I saw all of these girls in his *college*, you know, *I can't believe,* I saw their *shorts*, their *legs*, their *face*, they're so *cute!*"

This is consistent with Chandni's aspiration, supported by her boyfriend, to be a professional working woman – "…after marriage too, he wants me to work. And I really like that…" Although Chandni's boyfriend commented on her appearance, these young women's body/appearance work was less about being desirable to men, more about desirability in certain (work) spaces. For Chandni, her appearance was a way to claim the same status as the young women in her boyfriend's college who she described as 'cute', the young women who go to 'regular' college rather than pursue undergraduate degrees through open learning. Chandni's income provided her access to such appearance and that appearance in turn helped her position herself as a professional and sophisticated young woman –

> "With these events jobs, I can save my money and in one year, it could get to Rs.1 lakh. I know, as a girl, I don't have many expenses. *Cosmetics, makeup, perfume* etc., I can buy in a month and it costs quite a bit but I use it all for the next three to four months. I don't compromise on *quality* with these things though, for my *face*, I want to use good *brands*…"

In this conversation, Chandni expressed confidence about using makeup (she commented on how this is a relatively recent change in her; in school, she used to have oiled and plaited hair), but she also went to great lengths to clarify that she does not use cheaply available cosmetics, she uses only 'good brands'. She also further explained that she does so conscientiously and reasonably in that the expenditure incurred is only every three to four months. In this way, she signalled that she's not wasteful but she is also not 'cheap'. Makeup is an underexplored topic in academic scholarship, often dismissed as women's participation in or compliance with their own sexual objectification. However, for these young women, makeup is not normative practice and is connected specifically to their participation in the new economy. Most of my

respondents did not wear much, if any, makeup on an everyday basis. It also needs to be added that wearing makeup, and particularly wearing makeup to work, is not necessarily the norm in India (as it tends to be in Western countries). For most respondents, makeup was something they indulged in once in a while for weddings and festivals (they showed me photos on their phones after these events and later I saw them posted on Instagram and WhatsApp). However, for some young women, wearing makeup everyday seemed to be emerging as a practice closely associated with their work.

When Prachi and I visited Deepti in the café she worked in, Prachi took the opportunity to comment on how Deepti had changed since she joined work, she had started wearing lipstick and eyeliner. The comment by Prachi, although seemingly about Deepti's appearance, was also about how Deepti seemed to have put on airs. Deepti laughed off the comment and said it is Prachi who has now become too busy to meet her. Similar to Chandni and Deepti, Jahanvi also referred to her makeup as something she accessed through work. She put on makeup when she went to the mall to search for vacancies and this strangely became a topic of discussion in her job interview –

> "When I was interviewed for this new job, I went with my younger sister…When I went to her [the employer], she asked for my *résumé*, then she didn't say anything except why are you wearing this *colour* of *lipstick*, I said because I like it. She said she'd seen me the day before as well when I was wearing *orange lipstick*, today I'm wearing *baby pink*, why? I said because I like this one (laughs). She said why so *dark*? So, in my mind, I kept thinking what is this *interview*, what is she trying to guess by my *lipstick colour*, I wasn't entirely sure how to respond. Maybe she expected me to say I've done this for the interview."

Quite interestingly, although Jahanvi made a connection between work and makeup, she also thought it was precisely through her participation in paid work that her new appearance – Western clothes and makeup – had become acceptable at home, particularly to her father. She thought this acceptance had come alongside her father's changing attitude towards working women in response to her conducting herself respectably and not doing anything 'wrong' while working –

> "He [my father] used to tell me off for my clothes before, he'd say wear *suit salwar* [tunic and trousers]. Now he himself tells me to wear *pants* to work.

Before he'd tell me off for even putting on *lip balm*, now I don't take off *makeup* when I come home from work."

Such changes in attitudes towards women's work, mobility, and appearances, were however not forthcoming. For young women, community scrutiny of their changed appearance – Western clothes and makeup – was very much expected. Neha, who was on temporary leave from her work as a sales assistant at a shop in the mall, closely linked her appearance with her work, her mobility, and the 'middle class' neighbourhood she lived in. In describing the unease that her neighbours caused her, she expressed the desire to live in a better area where people are more open-minded –

"That happens a lot. You get dressed, you go out in *jeans* and *top*, see the girl is roaming around…Nobody looks at themselves. If our parents don't have a *problem*, then why do you have a *problem*? But then I don't care either…Like when I used to come here for the *job*. People would say their girl is going out, she's started doing a *job*, she comes back so late at night, wonder what the area is like, she comes through lonely roads…all of these *comments* would start. And even when we'd shower and get ready, for a *party* or something, even a little *makeup*, they'd say their girls are going out like this. Even to my brother, like another relative would come, they would also have this sense…One time my aunt's son came, I went with him on the *bike*, the neighbours started saying your girl went out with a boy on a *bike*. Mummy said, my daughter? She said I completely trust my daughter, who are you talking about? She told them it was my aunt's son. That kind of thing. And nobody looks at their own daughters and where they are going, they keep checking other people's daughters. It's not a good area. I told *papa* earlier too we should shift from here…"

These narratives about modified appearances – as agentic and assertive, on the one hand, and uncomfortable, on the other – capture the anxieties around young women's participation in work that while desired (and admired or even envied at times) can also lead to their classification as 'without respect'. While young women's adorning of Western clothes and makeup is undoubtedly part of consumption practices, it is also an attempt at professionalisation of the body. Based on their ethnographic fieldwork in Delhi and Mumbai with baristas and gym trainers, Bass and Cayla (2019) argue that young workers' modifications of their appearances in the process of engagement in the

service economy is part of struggle for recognition and visibility (also see, Dickey, 2016). The need to assert oneself through appearances that signal 'belonging' has also been noted in the context of 'race' in the workplace. Contesting the oppression/agency dichotomy in sociological discussions of women's makeup, Dellinger and Williams (1997) note Black women's particular investment into their appearances at work –

> "Both Sarah and Kathy feel that wearing makeup is a necessary part of being respected as women of color in a racist world. Looking professional for these women may have a different meaning than it does for many white women: Wearing the 'right' makeup plays a part in gaining respect (perhaps gaining the status of white women) in the workplace, even though it entails sexual objectification." (p.166)

Similar to Otis' (2012) observation that migrant luxury hotel workers in Beijing "...use cosmetics and other accoutrements in abundance to counter urban stereotypes of rural people as unclean and backward" (p.4), lower middle class women may adapt their appearances to assert their newfound belonging in service work. This section highlights not only how young women's bodies are constitutive of their 'plastic habitus' but also reiterates young women's awareness of surveillance of and conflicts over their bodily plasticity.

'Doing a job is no easy thing': Hard work, exhaustion, and injuries

> Me: "How do you travel to work?"
> Sheela: "I get the *Gramin Sewa* to come here and go back in a shared auto. *Gramin Sewa* runs at all times, they keep calling out 'Nehru Place, Nehru Place'. From home, I get *Gramin Sewa* to Tigri, that's Rs. 5. From there, I get *Gramin Sewa* to Nehru Place, then I get off here."
> Me: "So how much do you spend on travel?'
> Sheela: "Rs. 30 [30 pence] daily. It's a bit much, isn't it? (Laughs) I don't know about buses…If I come here early in the morning, I can't get *Gramin Sewa*, there's a lot of traffic here in the mornings, then *by chance* I get a *bus*. It's so crowded, you can't really step on it."

In late 2018, over WhatsApp, Chandni told me that Sheela had met with an accident. When returning from work, Sheela had fallen off the shared mini-van service – *Gramin*

Sewa – that she used to commute every day. She had apparently jumped off the van while it was still moving because the driver ignored her request to halt and as the only passenger on the service at the time, she got scared. Sheela took herself to a clinic and got some first aid. In *Cuppa n Cake*, where I first met Sheela and Prachi, I noted, there was no provision for workers to sit down, get changed, or take a break. I would usually sit down with my coffee, laptop, and notebook while Sheela and Prachi would stand for hours on end, sometimes behind the till, at other times, pacing in the café waiting for customers. Rarely, one of them would complain about headache, back pain, or period cramps. More commonly, unease or pain would be expressed through silence and sullenness.

Exhaustion and injuries are commonplace and inevitable aspects of work – the body is indeed a finite resource. Sheela's accident, for that matter, can be dismissed as just an accident. However, I argue that these young women's bodies are at risk in the course of work due to the marginality of their class and gender. In their narratives, work-related exhaustion and injuries were both ubiquitous and invisibilised. More explicit articulations emerged only when I asked specific questions about travelling to work, lunchtime arrangements, working hours, and so on. Even then, young women narrated their work-related exhaustion and injuries as normal and expected, not as something that needed to be addressed. In this section, I sketch out some common forms of exhaustion and injuries incurred by young women workers and the way their bodies are invested in recovery, reproduction, and negotiation of labour. I particularly consider exhaustion – from commuting, long working hours, minmal rest breaks – and injuries, including sexual harassment. I argue that the concepts of 'emotional labour' and 'body work' in analysis of service work do not pay adequate attention to exhaustion and injuries. I, therefore, consider the depletion of young women's bodies in their service jobs through the frame of 'bodies at work' (Wolkowitz, 2006). Young women's endurance of exhaustion and injuries at work is in stark contrast to their emphatic resistance to doing manual labour that they considered a threat to their 'respectability'. Why do young women not resist work-related bodily exhaustion and injuries? I suggest that while rejecting stigmatised forms of manual labour, they see exhaustion and injuries as part of 'hard work', as an attempt to compensate for their 'lack' in the field. This discord between resisting the implication of the body in manual labour or domestic

work while also investing the body through enduring exhaustion and injuries betrays their status as neophyte service workers.

Although most of my respondents live and work in South Delhi (Chapter 3 discussed how the location of work was key in making decisions about women's participation in employment), and their commuting time is not unexpectedly long (only a few travel more than 45 minutes to work), their access to means of transport is not straightforward. There is wide-ranging literature that analyses travel choices, behaviours, and patterns as they relate to social attributes of age, gender, race, etc. Further, scholars have explored the limitations of access to public transport for residents of low-income areas in developing countries (Srinivasan and Rogers, 2005; Salon and Gulyani, 2010). When I travelled around Delhi, I commonly used DTC (Delhi Transport Corporation) buses and the relatively recent metro system in the city, marvelling at how connected the city now seemed in contrast to a decade ago. While as a woman I was cognisant of some gendered aspects of travelling, the classed aspects became apparent to me only through these young women's narratives.

For women living in Khanpur and Dakshinpuri and travelling to Saket (and other nearby areas), buses and metro were not the preferred modes of commute for a range of reasons. Although the Delhi metro is recognised for creating a sense of connectedness, accessibility, and safety, particularly for women in the city (Sadana, 2010; Tara, 2011), it was out of reach for these young women, due to both cost and their residential location[36]. Buses, while cheaper, had a reputation for being overcrowded and unsafe, in terms of risk of both theft and sexual harassment.[37] These young women then relied primarily on '*Gramin Sewa'* (and sometimes shared autos) to get around the city. *Gramin Sewa* (literally translates to 'Rural Service') is a service that was introduced in 2010 to cover the 'urban villages' of Delhi where the reach of DTC buses is limited. These six to

[36] The Delhi Chief Minister, Arvind Kejriwal, in June 2019, announced a proposal to offer free rides on the metro and buses to women in the city. The proposal, if effectively implemented, can have an impact on women's mobility and employment choices (see my article, *What Free Public Transport Means to Delhi's Women*, June 2019, IndiaSpend).

[37] Buses have a particularly bad reputation in terms of risk of sexual harassment. Besides the number of people on buses during rush hours (although some seats in the front are reserved for women, many respondents commented on how there is hardly any space to even stand on buses), this may be a particular repercussion of the infamous 2012 gang rape of Jyoti Singh that took place on a bus. The incident led to mass protests in India about women's safety and was widely covered in international media.

nine-seater mini-vans operate on a sharing basis, picking up passengers along their route. Running *through* the neighbourhoods of Khanpur and Dakshinpuri, *Gramin Sewa* was popular among my respondents because of its accessibility and cheap cost. However, it was not necessarily a reliable or direct mode of commuting to the upper middle class zones that their workplaces were located in. Commuting on *Gramin Sewa* often involved waiting, rushing, and changing in attempts to reach work on time. While through participation in paid work, women had come to know and enjoy the city (as discussed in Chapter 3), their relative prior confinement to their homes and neighbourhoods meant they were not familiar with the transport system to begin with, as Pranjali, an office worker, explained –

> "There are a lot of problems in the *starting*. Doing *up-down* on the bus everyday, in so much rush, at 9 in the morning. There's always risk of phone getting stolen, somebody or the other shouting, I keep mine in my hand now…CR Park is not far from Tigri but there are no buses, you have to change. By *auto*, it's direct. If you take *Gramin Sewa*, you have to take two of those too."

The most direct form of transport for these women are three-wheeler autos that can be hailed on the streets but compared to the Rs. 5-10 (5-10 pence) cost of *Gramin Sewa*, autos would cost a minimum of Rs. 40 (40 pence). Within their limited financial means, young women then saw doing 'up-down' as an inevitable cost of participation in paid work. While they lamented the financial implications of their commute (Sheela commented on how her travel cost of Rs.30 or 30 pence per day was a bit much), they accepted depletion of their energy as normal. This everyday travel was further exacerbated for mothers who I conducted supplementary interviews with. Rama, resident in Badarpur and a fieldworker for a non-government organisation in South Delhi, commuted an hour and a half each way every day. Her commute included walking 20-25 minutes from her house to the bus stop, changing buses half way, and then finally walking another 15-20 minutes to work. She did this journey on overcrowded buses rather than on metro to save money and carried her one year old daughter with her every day. Her husband who worked in a factory, on the other hand, travelled to work on his motorbike, which they bought on a loan that they were paying off through monthly instalments. It was common among other families for men – including these young women's brothers – to buy motorbikes as a sign of upward mobility. The lanes of

Dakshinpuri and Khanpur were cluttered with motorbikes but none belonged to or were used by women. Chandni told me she had finally bought a scooty (moped) for herself in 2018, but her younger brother was using it because she had still not learnt how to ride it.

While commuting put the body at risk of both exhaustion and accidents or injuries through *movement*, sales work in cafés and malls was cumbersome in its *stillness*. Workers had to stand all day and 'swollen legs' was a very common refrain that women relied on to describe exhaustion resultant from work. Jahanvi disrupted the image of mall work as glamorous work that involves wearing pants, shirts, and makeup –

> "You know doing a *job* is no easy thing. It might look like that. You know when I come back home, my legs hurt so much. And you have to tolerate a lot at work, it's not like you can just draw a *salary* and enjoy your *job*."

Other respondents similarly spoke about the exhaustion from standing up all day. Although they acknowledged the limits of the body as a resource, they did not demand any breaks or rest time from their employers, eventually 'getting used' to such exhaustion. Confirming my observations at cafés, Deepti told me that she does not really have a lunch break during her work day –

> Me: "What do you do about lunch?"
> Deepti: "We don't really get time for *lunch*. We just eat whenever we can, just sitting on the *stool* there. Where will we go outside? We all get done in 10 minutes. Sometimes we just don't get *time*…there's no *time fixed*. Staff come at different times. I eat and someone else covers, or someone else eats and I cover…Our whole day goes by just standing up…My legs are now always swollen. When I lift my legs, they hurt…It takes half an hour to go to the stop…"
> Prachi: "Yeah, I had the same. *Mummy* used to offer to massage them…"
> Deepti: "Now I'm used to it. When you become used to it, you can't really tell. Like I can't tell anymore."

Further, while in the case of unmarried women, mothers often provided the care needed for reproduction of their labour – "Mummy used to offer to massage [my legs]" – unsurprisingly married women have very limited access to rest even when home. The married women I conducted supplementary interviews with spoke about cooking

before leaving for work as well as taking on the primary care giving role for their children. One of the interviews with Sushma, a 29 year old driver, married and with two young children, was particularly interesting. Sushma reflected on the extraordinariness of women's labour as well as men's incapacity to withstand exhaustion –

> "When men *drivers* go back home, they say, I'm tired and frustrated, my legs are hurting, I've been driving around all day. Even downstairs, there's a guy like that…his wife listened to him grumble for a few days, then she said, your legs hurt everyday, but the *didi* [sister] upstairs, she does house work, she has young children, she drives and her legs don't hurt…Even my husband, he comes back and lies down, like he's done some big work."

These narratives evidence young women's very limited access to the care needed for reproduction of their labour. While men generally expect and demand care after a day of work, middle and upper class women may be able to access rest by relying on paid domestic help.

To turn to the question of why young women normalise exhaustion and injuries while resisting manual labour at work, their endurance is perhaps not only an investment in the form of hard work but also betrays the vulnerability and precariousness of their position at work. Wolkowitz (2006) suggests, "The more precarious the workers' hold on access to work, the more they are likely to be wary of reporting incidents, for fear of losing their job or losing out on the chance of promotion to easier work" (p.102). While these young women at work did not necessarily consider chances of promotion (further discussed in the next chapter), they did feel like they had very limited bargaining power in the relationship with their employer. This became evident through their narratives of accidents and injuries, including sexual harassment. Although young women were employed in service work that does not necessitate bodily contact with users/clients, occasionally injuries occurred during the course of work, but were managed by workers themselves rather than reported. Deepti told me about the time when the 'international team' of her café chain visited for inspection. Deepti and her colleagues were excited by the visit from 'white people', especially a White man called Ryan, who they thought looked like a movie star. Perhaps amidst excitement, Deepti ended up burning her hand with steam while preparing coffee. Although it was a serious burn, Deepti stifled her scream and carried on pretending like nothing had happened. She noted that asking for

help in that moment would have led to admitting to a mistake that she thought would compromise her position in the café, especially with her manager. Deepti had previously commented on her dispensability – "I can quit, it doesn't impact him [the manager] in any way, he'll find more staff." This speaks to Casanova's (2013) study of domestic workers in Guayaquil, Ecuador who reflected on their bodies as an exhaustible resource, linking the degradation of their bodies to the low value assigned to them by employers.

Although Deepti did not talk any further about this incident, it was described in continuum with stories of sexual harassment. Deepti said 'old sleazy men' and 'druggies' frequent the café and try to touch the girls who serve them. She described managing this by trying to establish distance from them, either literally by positioning her body in a way that they couldn't reach her or by invoking the age difference between them. Young women deployed the familial figures of 'fathers' and 'uncles' to shame men harassing them. Some women did not necessarily relate incidents of sexual harassment but spoke of men at work as being troublesome by 'liking them' and at times, stalking them. But none of the women who spoke about such incidents ever reported them to their managers. Of course, in some cases, the managers were the perpetrators, thereby making it even more difficult to pursue complaints. Chapter 3 discussed the value of women's friendships in workplaces; in cases of sexual harassment, women looked out for each other, sometimes rebuking friends for not being more cautious in the first place. Chandni and Chitra had previously worked in a call centre and had dealt with sexual advances of a manager together –

> Prachi: "Did you have many men in your *office* before?"
> Chandni: "Yes, in my previous *office*, there were quite a few. I talked to everyone; I was quite *frank.* But once I found out somebody was looking at me in a bad way. I was only 16 years at the time. I didn't know much but I could tell if somebody's *touch* was bad. *Call centres* are bad that way, especially smaller ones…Both Chitra and I went together, we used to protect each other, we used to protect Pooja too. She was very naive. This guy at the office pulled on the string of her tunic one day. I wasn't in the office that day. Chitra told me. So the next day we picked a fight in the office…"
> Me: "Nobody ever complained?"
> Chandni: "No, he was the *boss* of the office. He tried to be *extra friendly* with me

> once, so I said to him, *sir*, you know you're like my father…He didn't touch me but he tried to be *over friendly…*Chitra told him to not be *over friendly* …So when we found out about Pooja, we went to him, and said what is this about. He used to touch her thighs and such things. We told off Pooja too."

Alongside the sense of adventure in spending time with men at work, as noted in Chapter 3, young women also had a sense of risk and need to be vigilant in workplaces. Taking responsibility for maintaining their safety and dignity in workplaces, women either negotiated sexual harassment themselves or left work altogether. This can be attributed to a range of reasons – their vulnerability in workplaces, lack of awareness regarding legal rights, difficulties in accessing legal recourse, and prevailing attitudes that may blame women for exposing themselves to sexual harassment. Already subject to scrutiny for the 'kind of work' they do (as discussed in Chapter 4), young women preferred not to make a 'big deal' out of these incidents. Some women noted that they did not even tell their parents about incidents of sexual harassment because they would compel them to leave work and 'stay at home'.

This section cannot claim to do full justice to capturing the extent of exhaustion and injuries that young women endure through and at work; however, it attempts to draw attention to a topic otherwise neglected in literature on service work. While some scholars have commented on 'emotional exhaustion' resulting from emotional dissonance in service work (Mishra and Bhatnagar, 2010; Rathi, Bhatnagar and Mishra, 2013), they do not extend this to depletion of workers' bodies, what Berlant (2007) calls 'slow death', whereby "life building and the attrition of human life are indistinguishable" (p.754). The neglect of 'slow death' in service work, I suggest, can be attributed to the understanding that emerging service work relies much more on emotional rather than manual or bodily labour. However, these young women's experiences show that even in work that does not rely on the body as the primary resource for labour, exhaustion and injuries are commonplace by virtue of the low value assigned to their bodies. Navigating transport, standing for long hours of work, no rest breaks, and sexual harassment, young women workers discussed exhaustion and injuries as inevitable and *endurable*. In doing so, these young women invest their bodies into the new service economy through 'hard work'. Through workers' attitudes towards bodily labour, we can further

sociological understanding of work relations, particularly in emerging forms of service work that may not primarily rely on the body for labour.

Conclusion

In exploring young women's experiences of service work, I use the term 'bodies' quite literally. However, this literal use of 'bodies' does not suggest a separation of the material from the cultural. Indeed, bodies at work operate in myriad intersecting ways as both resource and symbol. The extent to which the body is used as a resource in exchange for a wage may betray the 'class' of the work and the worker. This is in consonance with the persistence of Cartesian mind-body dualism, whereby the abstract/thinking/managerial mind is always in a superior position to the material/base/working body. Wolkowitz (2006) deploys this argument to suggest that –

> "The relative absence of the body from most studies of work is no doubt also due to the fact that most of the activities which directly service the body…have historically been provided by servants or slaves, or by women in their roles as wives and mothers, i.e. outside the labour market and not publicly visible as work at all." (p.14)

Further, work that involves removal of 'contamination' – sweeping, washing, mopping – is reserved for those on the lowest social rung, and in India, particularly for people from the lowest castes (Carswell and De Neve, 2014; Gatade, 2015). As such, it is not surprising that young lower middle class women entering new service work distance themselves from bodily labour, especially bodily labour that can be categorised as domestic work. Ray and Qayum (2009) elaborate – "The core activities of cooking, cleaning, and child care involve managing order and disorder, dealing with hygiene and refuse, and turning the raw into the cooked...to be middle class is to distance oneself from work on the boundaries of purity and pollution" (p.18). Moreover, this rejection of domestic work in jobs that they expect to be 'skilled' is also a form of claiming of respectability through distancing from necessity.

This positioning of their bodies in service work is also reflected in the way young women are attentive to their appearance as workers. Many of the respondents are in jobs that require uniforms. In India, uniforms have previously been the reserve of men-

dominated professions, such as drivers and security guards. For young women, wearing uniforms is thus a sort of overcoming of their gender, if not necessarily class. However, as a new form of appearance, uniforms are also a site for anxiety. Women expressed unease with wearing uniforms in their neighbourhoods, often changing into and out of their uniforms at work. Makeup also emerged as a new way to claim the professional service worker identity, more common among younger unmarried women who could afford to use a small part of their income to buy makeup. Recalling earlier discussions of scrutiny over their participation in employment, young women were conscious of judgments from neighbours about their dressing and makeup practices.

While the distancing of bodies from domestic work and the investment of bodies in appearance work is in consonance with young women's efforts to position themselves as professional service workers, dissonances emerged too. These dissonances were not only expressed in the form of anxiety about clothing/uniforms and makeup but also particularly in their lack of resistance to exhaustion and injuries at work. Although the finiteness of the body as a resource has been a pervasive theme in studies of work, exhaustion and injuries are rarely explored in service work since service work is considered to be 'safe' non-manual work. However, through young women workers' narratives we can see how physical exhaustion and injuries are very much part of their experience of service work. This chapter, therefore, provides an important intervention in the scholarship of work by centralising exhaustion and injuries in emerging forms of work.

Young women's narratives also call into question why they do not resist unfair working conditions – long working hours, no breaks – that lead to exhaustion and injuries when they do manage to resist bodily labour that qualifies as domestic work? These can be read as "…moments in which workers resist what is seen as the appropriate corporeality for their station in this social and political environment" (Casanova, 2013, p. 579). This 'appropriate corporeality' then betrays assertion of distancing from working-classness through refusal to do domestic work but perhaps also an attachment to the working class value of 'hard work' or an "instrumental relation to their body" (Shilling, 1993, p. 130). Young women may invest their bodies as 'physical capital' (ibid) into work when faced with lack of other forms of capital in the field. For example, many respondents expressed nervousness about their English speaking skills, as noted in the previous

chapter. Sheela was more comfortable working in the back of the café than having to deal with customers who expected communication in English. It is then interesting to reflect on the 'convertibility' of their physical capital – while they present themselves as professional working women through body work, the symbolic value of their bodies remains limited, and they are therefore compelled to rely on investing bodies directly as labour, leading to exhaustion and injuries. As Shilling (1993) puts it, "…there tend to be high risks and opportunity costs associated with working class efforts to convert physical capital into other resources" (p.137).

In valuation of their own bodies, in terms of labour, appearance, and depletion, young women workers demonstrate, as Bourdieu suggests, that "the social is indeed 'in the bones'" (Wolkowitz, 2006, p.20). As women whose parents mostly relied on their bodies as the primary object of labour, they sustain their participation in paid work through resilience to exhaustion and injuries. However, as women entering jobs that require upper middle class comportment, they are adopting new forms of 'body work', thus attempting to convert their physical capital into symbolic capital. These adjustments in their corporeality can contribute to understanding "…the ways that individuals may learn to accommodate the shifting bodily requirements imposed by either historical economic changes or their own transition (whether desired or not) from one employment sector to another (Cregan 2006)," (Gimlin, 2007, p. 365). The role that their bodies play in such socio-economic transition, signals the symbolic value and, thus, anxieties assigned to women's bodies. Further, it shows the difficulties of navigating injurious classed positions – while they seek distinction from those 'beneath' them through their labour, this labour also depletes them in various ways. This chapter provides a unique insight into the significance of women's work as a site of gender and class formations through young women workers' narratives about their corporeal adjustments. In the next chapter, I consider the accumulation of injuries in precarious work that leads to young women's exit from employment.

CHAPTER 6

‘I don’t want to make a career in this’: Precarity

Image 8: The labour of life

Introduction

When I first met Chandni in November 2016, she had just left her job working behind the till at *Cuppa n Cake* in South Delhi. Over the next six months, she switched between being unemployed, doing ad hoc events and promotions work, participating in paid market research focus groups, and finding a data entry job in a small office. When I returned to the field in December 2017, six months after I had 'officially' finished fieldwork, Chandni was once again unemployed. I went to visit her in the new flat that her family had rented. The previous landlord, Chandni told me, was not understanding at all and did not allow them late payments on rent. In any case, her father thought that the previous flat had brought them bad luck – he had lost his job when they were living there and had been unable to go back to work since. He hoped that the new space would help to break the curse of unemployment. Chandni's mother, in the meantime, had found a job as a live-in carer for a child and was therefore no longer living permanently at home. Chandni had stepped up to the occasion and was managing the household in her mother's absence.

Chandni was also taking this time to properly prepare for exams for the second year of her undergraduate degree. She told me that since I left for Cambridge, she had worked (along with her friend Chitra) in an office where she had to call customers to sell credit cards – she did not like this job; done a few days of 'event' work – she proudly showed me the bedsheet she had bought with this income; and had followed up on another job lead but it had not been successful. Blaming unemployment for loss of routine and procrastination, she said she wanted to look for a more 'stable' job. She was disappointed that her friend, Chitra, was no longer invested in finding employment and was waiting to get married. Chandni commented – "Once this love runs out, Chitra will just be another *housewife*." Fast forward another six months, when I visited Delhi in July 2018, Chandni had found a new data entry job in an office. Her brother was about to complete class XII. Her mother was still living away from home. The flat had not brought better luck to her father.

In this chapter, I explore young women's *exit* from employment. Chandni's movement across various kinds of employment and other activities – including studies and domestic responsibilities – is fairly representative of other respondents' trajectories too. During nine months of fieldwork, some of my respondents quit their jobs while many

others expressed the desire to do so. Talk about 'resignations' was rife throughout. Respondents used the English word 'resign' to talk about quitting from work. Angry or upset with managers, colleagues, or their working conditions, they would often say – 'I will definitely hand in my *resign* [sic] today!' As discussed in Chapter 2, this had important implications for the way I conducted the ethnography, following women's *lives* rather than *employment* in isolation. By keeping in touch with some respondents over WhatsApp after my fieldwork had concluded, I learnt about their pursuit of other jobs and activities, such as, higher education and marriage. In India, the low and declining participation of women in the workforce or 'de-feminisation of labour' (Abraham, 2013) has preoccupied researchers in recent years. Of course, the issue of women's participation and retention in the workforce is not new or unique to India (although it may be heightened there). Historically, employers, managers, and unions have understood women's tenuous relationship with paid work as 'irregularity' of women's labour premised on their attachment to domesticity (Sen, 1999; Ong, 2010, pp. 141–178; Betti, 2016). They have deployed this 'irregularity' to not employ women, to offer lower wages to women, and to not consider women's issues as workers' issues.

Previous chapters, particularly Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, demonstrate that young urban women are keen to define themselves as 'workers', rather than 'housewives', which is also reiterated in Chandni's disdainful comment about Chitra – "Once this love runs out, Chitra will be just another *housewife*." But despite changes in attitudes to women's work, which I argue has become a practice of distinction, analysis of women's movement in and out of employment is still largely premised on simplistic calculations of 'opportunity costs' of paid and unpaid work (Abraham, 2013). This is in contrast to interesting explorations of young men's unemployment, as discussed in Chapter 3, which take into account wide ranging socio-economic factors, including availability of employment, emerging ideas of 'good' work, and alternatives to standard employment (see, Mains, 2007; Schielke, 2008; Jeffrey, 2010a). In this chapter, I ask – why and how do young women, despite attractions of employment and the importance of their earnings for their families, leave work? In addressing this question through ethnographic explorations, I place young women's employment in the mesh of availability and conditions of employment, changing value and meaning of employment, and conditions of life.

Chapter 1 discussed the conditions of work in the new service economy in India. Although the concept of 'precarity' is more commonly used to describe erosion of social protection and guarantees in advanced capitalist countries, it also offers a way to describe conditions of emerging work in India (Gooptu, 2013b; Maiti, 2013; Rogan *et al.*, 2018). It may be argued that young women's entry into semi-skilled service work is an improvement over their parents' employment in 'unskilled' manual work, but the respondents for this research reported experiencing their work as unstable, insecure, and short-term. They emphasised that while they have *jobs*, they do not have *careers*. Most of the respondents decided to quit work themselves, expressing *wilfulness* in their exit, but they were also constantly aware that their employer could fire them at a moment's notice, rendering them jobless. Their investment into the 'future' was thus redundant, recalling Standing (2011) –

> "The precariat know there is no shadow of the future, as there is no future in what they are doing. To be 'out' tomorrow would come as no surprise, and to leave might not be bad, if another job or burst of activity beckoned." (p.12)

This precariousness of employment seeps into other aspects of these young women's lives. Often involved in multiple strategies to secure their futures – work, education, marriage – as we see in Chandni's account above, young women reflected on not only the instability of employment but also the instability of their *lives.* These reflections detract from theories of precarity that are limited to (paid) work and workplaces (such as, Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011); they highlight the connections between "forms of labor and fragile conditions of life" (Millar, 2017, p. 7) (also see, Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). Further, they draw attention to the differential distribution of precarity (see discussion in Puar, 2012) along lines of class and gender, exposing the complex ways in which low-paid women workers may experience precarity (Federici, 2006; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2014; Betti, 2016). I deploy this complex web of precarity to understand young women's reasons for leaving employment, which otherwise may seem 'casual' – to attend weddings, to celebrate anniversaries, or in response to dislike of a colleague or manager. I suggest, following the argument from previous chapters, that in seeking *distinction* through their labour, which is in part injurious, young women reach a 'breaking point' when they quit work, contesting the understanding that seeking distinction is a linear process.

This chapter is structured as follows – I first present the immediate reasons that the respondents provided for leaving work. These overlap with previous discussions of *injuries* of gender and class in the workplace. Second, I outline an expanded concept of precarity through young women's narratives of insecurity, instability, and interdependence. This takes into account conditions of both their work and their lives. In the final section, I turn to young women's imaginations of their futures. Despite the constraints and costs of employment that emerge in this thesis, young women insist on their desire for work. Similar to young men (Mains, 2007; Jeffrey, 2010a), the respondents expressed preference for stable and secure 'government jobs'. But, as young women negotiating familial control, they also insisted on finding life partners who would not only allow but encourage them to seek employment. I conclude with comments on women's ambivalent attachments to employment.

'I can't lose my respect for a little bit of money': Reasons for resignations

During the first phase of fieldwork, I frequented the office of a cab company that hired women drivers. I usually timed my visits to coincide with lunchtime so I could have opportunity to chat informally. On one of such visits, as we settled in for lunch, one of the drivers – Ramdevi – stormed in. Visibly angry, she proclaimed – "I've had it! I'm going to resign from here today!" Others hushed her and asked what had happened. Someone quietly signalled to shut the door that opened into the corridor and faced the management staff office. The manager had denied leave that Ramdevi had requested and informed her of an upcoming salary deduction because of damage to the cab that she had been driving. Fuming at the management, Ramdevi asked, "What's the point of working here? I don't want to do it anymore!" While other drivers managed to calm her down, they expressed similar resentment regarding management in our following interactions. They spoke about how the company does not offer them flexibility, blames them even when the clients are being unfair, and has not raised their salaries even though the management, or 'hi-fi' people, take away fat cheques.

Such resentment against managers was common among my respondents. It emerged both during my observations in workplaces (particularly in the windows of time when managers were not present) and in our conversations outside of workplaces. This resentment was framed by both gender and class. In early days of fieldwork, Prachi already commented on how all of them are mistreated at work because their employers

know that they come from modest backgrounds, *'chhote ghar'*, pointing to class difference between them and managerial staff. Chandni reiterated this sentiment – "Just because we're *working* should not mean that they can say whatever they want to us…" Chapter 5 discusses how young women strive to attain and maintain 'respectability' through and at work. This 'respectability' is always under threat and therefore needs to be repeatedly asserted. Refusing to perform manual or domestic labour was one mechanism to preserve 'respectability'. Their resignations emerged as another such mechanism – many respondents left work to protest managers' behaviour towards them. Although male workers on semi-skilled positions may also similarly negotiate the terms of their labour with their managers, young women's concerns about 'respectability' were specifically about negotiating the negative connotations of *'working women'.* They were also mostly working under the supervision of male managers (this was not the case for cab drivers who had an all-female management team but it was very much the case with other respondents across cafés, call centres, malls, and offices). Prachi added that 'male ego' is at play in workplace dynamics; male managers look down upon female employees and cannot accept their 'feminism'. While young women accepted exhaustion and injuries as part of their employment, they seemed to reach a 'breaking point' in expressing their 'turnover intentions' (Mishra and Bhatnagar, 2010) and in ultimately making the decision to quit.

Deepti, who worked at *Espresso*, said that although she somewhat likes her work (and definitely does not want to sit at home), she had been thinking about quitting for a while. When I probed further, she said it is to do with the manager's behaviour –

> "Like when you get told off for no mistake of yours. Or when they tell me off in front of other people. We can't react to that, I get angry. Then I think I should quit, there's no respect, no value for my work, so what's the point. But then I can quit, it doesn't impact him in any way, he'll find more staff."

Deepti felt that she was not respected by her manager; further, while this made her want to leave work, she was aware that her attempt to protest by resigning would go unnoticed. Deepti knew very well that as a low-paid and low-level member of staff, she is replaceable. She was also not confident that she would be able to find another job immediately and contemplated the unhappy prospect of having to 'sit at home' (discussed in Chapter 3). With such a vulnerable position in the workplace, Deepti was

unable to respond to her manager, even when she thought his reprimands were unfair. Further elaborating on reasons that made her want to quit, Deepti said –

> "You know he used to tell me off so much, I would feel like crying on the inside, then he'd put me in the front…I cried one day too. First off, we didn't have enough staff. Just the two of us. How much work can two people do? Then they'd come and point out mistakes, you didn't do this, you didn't do that. I didn't argue. I don't say much, I keep it inside myself, and I let it out by crying. They're going to point out mistakes in everything. I thought if I stay, I'll say something angrily. I went downstairs and started crying. When I came up, he asked, 'Have you been crying? Oh, I'll never say anything anymore.' Then he tried to make it up to me, I told him not to do this for me."

Deepti's management of her emotions in this instance was reiterated by several respondents. Crying after conflicts over issues, such as, failure to accomplish sales targets, arriving late, taking time off, or making mistakes, was a common refrain. Sheela reported Chandni emerging from the toilet with 'red puffy eyes' after the manager refused her leave to celebrate her anniversary; Prachi said she cried when Sheela told her what other colleagues had been saying about her; Shipra cried when she was put in a team separate from her friend, Kirti, in a call centre. In her study of neophyte factory women in Malaysia, Ong (2010) notes the phenomenon of women workers' emotional outbursts – "…a female office worker noted that when foremen scolded the operators, the latter were not allowed to respond but had to be 'very polite'…Crying sometimes seemed the only way to seek relief from being reprimanded and to obtain pardon" (p.165) (also see, Ngai, 2005, pp. 165–188). For these young women too, crying seemed to be one way to express unhappiness about being treated disrespectfully.

Deepti had been considering resigning from her position because of this particular manager but she decided to wait because she had heard that he might get transferred to another branch of *Espresso*. Deepti had some hope that they might get a better manager. She told me that a previous manager, a woman, made work much less stressful for the workers by creating a non-hierarchical work environment –

> "I got a really nice *manager* in the morning shift, she was less a *manager*, more a *friend*. When we'd go in the morning, the first half an hour would be our *selfie session* (laughs). We'd take 50, then we'd select a few to post. We'd get ready

> together. She'd also scold us and get us to do work like a *manager*, but still be friendly. We didn't even notice, six months went by. Then *ma'am* left. That's when we started feeling like we're *staff*."

Deepti's experience with a friendly female manager does not necessarily suggest that women workers always had pleasant experiences with women managers (the cab drivers, for example, were unhappy with the 'hi-fi' all-female management team). However, the enforcement of work hierarchy was largely gendered, with women rarely reaching managerial levels. Deepti herself thought that she could not possibly make a 'career' in the café business –

> "…our *seniors* won't let us progress, I've seen that here. There's a lot of *politics* in this line…If people stop doing *politics*, there's a lot of opportunity for progressing…In our *café*, there's just one *store manager* in South Ex who is a girl, the rest are boys."

Following on from appreciating how the female manager had been successful in creating a friendly environment, Deepti argued that managers' concern for staff wellbeing could enhance their productivity and reduce conflict –

> "*Seniors* should take care of their staff, then staff will work properly too. Let the staff go on time six days a week, then on the seventh day if you need them to stay back, nobody will say no. They'll look at the *rush* and offer to stay back. I'm like that too. I've never left at 5 pm. I always give at least an hour extra, so they can't really say no to me when I need something."

As the previous chapter notes, young women often worked six to seven days a week with very limited lunch and break time. While young women did not feel like they were in a position to resist these conditions and normalised them as 'hard work', Deepti suggested that they would put in this extra work more willingly if the managers respected and valued them. Prachi, who quit her café job within a few months after feeling disrespected by managers and colleagues, thought that respect and value was denied to them because of their low status in the workplace –

> "Once the *owner* visited the *café* and he should have asked us whether we like working there or not but nobody cares. It's such a big *brand*. They show

> something on the front but behind the back, it's different. I've had so much problem there, I can't face those people anymore."

She further added, "I expected professionalism in their behaviour and respect, *he should behave like that*, they're the ones training us. *I back out from that, it was horrible.*" Prachi quit her job by just not turning up the next day, she did not submit a resignation letter or work her notice period. Disgruntled by their unprofessional behaviour, she did not see much point in participating in formal workplace processes. She framed this as defiance of the expectation that "girls who are 'good' work silently". She asserted, "I'm not like this. I do what I think is right. I don't want to do the kind of work where I feel insulted, where I work hard and still can be told whatever…" Sheela worked at *Cuppa n Cake* for a total of 18 months. Prachi always thought that Sheela put up with too much in the café and that she should just quit – "I told her I understand there's a problem at her home, but how long can we put up with this…" Sheela, whilst also aware of the manager's and other colleagues' misbehaviour, seemed intent on sticking to it at the time. She decided to quit shortly after I finished fieldwork in the same fashion as Prachi. Over WhatsApp conversations she told me that she was not going to go to the café anymore because she had an argument with another girl who had recently joined there as a team member. Sheela felt insulted because no one in the café, including the manager, supported her despite her having worked there for so long.

Besides repeated incidents which made young women feel disrespected, another recurrent reason for leaving work was when managers denied them leave (further discussed in the next section). Chandni joined Prachi and Sheela at *Cuppa n Cake* but quit within a couple of weeks because she was not granted time off from work (Sheela joked that that was for the best because Chandni's endless chatter meant they could not get much work done!) –

> Prachi: "One of my friends [Chandni] joined the café too but she was so fed up in one or two weeks, she left. All three of us [Prachi, Chandni, and Sheela] travelled together so happily for a few days. She asked for time off for her anniversary - *she has a boyfriend* - and we all *deserve* a day off per week…"
>
> Me: "She worked at *Cuppa n Cake* too? In the CR Park branch? […]"

> Prachi: "Yes. She asked for time off but was refused. We're not the kind of people who would back down because we only ask for what we should get, what we know is right. *How can you expect a person to work for seven days?* She insisted on getting time off and was told to not report to the café anymore, she was then transferred to Malviya Nagar. In that café, there was no lock on the washroom. She couldn't survive there even two days."

Interestingly, none of these narratives invoke the contractual obligations of the employer or the employee. That is, none of the women said that they quit work because they were made to work overtime without any additional payment. It was, however, not simply that these young women were unaware of their rights as workers. When I inquired, they told me they were hired for six days a week but that they ended up working seven days a week, or that they regularly exceed their work hours and do not get paid for it. However, their demands for time off were not based on this awareness. Perhaps in Chandni's case, the manager in refusing her leave did act upon the rules and regulations given that she had only recently joined the café. Nevertheless, Chandni's demand, and Prachi's account of it, appealed to emotion – she has a boyfriend and she wants time off to celebrate their anniversary together. She claims that they 'deserve' time off, but I suggest this is drawn from a sense of being able to get something back in return for their *hard work*, rather than their contractual right. Their resignations then emerge as an expression of desire to claim and assert value in the workplace.

Further, concerns over 'respectability' in the workplace, discussed in previous chapters, extended to instances of sexual harassment too. Jahanvi worked at *Donut Time* for four months. She explained that despite being a model employee – quick learner, hard worker – she was asked to leave because she refused to indulge the advances of a manager – "…there was this one sir, I didn't talk to him nicely. He used to look at me in a way that made me very uncomfortable. But he noticed that I talked nicely to everyone else." Jahanvi's account of her resignation is interesting in that although she was asked to leave the job, that is, technically 'fired', she was keen on framing it as her decision to resign –

> "One day I reached at 10.10 am, he made me write the [resignation] *letter*. I said, *sir*, my *shift* starts at 10 am, even if I come at 10.30 am you can't make me do that. There's so much *traffic*, whether it's a *private* or a *government job*, being *late* by

> 10-15 minutes is allowed…I started crying, I cry quite easily. Then the *owner* came at 2 pm, he asked me, why don't you write the letter? I said I wasn't at fault, I told him they can fire me but I won't write my own resignation. So he fired me. I got really angry, I told him even if he wants me to stay now, I won't. Then he started asking me if I want to do the job, I said no. He asked again, I still said no. He asked me a final time, I said no. So, he clapped his hands and said take her resignation letter quickly. Tell her to change and leave. So, I quit. I can't lose my respect for a little bit of money."

Through taking control of the situation by resigning, Jahanvi also distanced herself from other girls in the café (recalling practices of 'disidentification' discussed in Chapter 4) who tolerated this particular manager's behaviour – "I told her, Prerna, [a colleague], don't think you won't get another job…But she's still working there…But I'm not that kind of girl." By establishing herself as a 'respectable' girl, Jahanvi said she was successful in finding another job –

> "Where I work now, one of my colleagues used to work at my old workplace too. When I came here, he recognised my name. He said he'd heard about me, he used to work the night shift. So he then backed me. He told *ma'am* that I'm a very good girl, he explained why I'd resigned from there, and said that he'd never heard any bad thing about me. He said to me one day, there are so many pretty girls around, *don't mind*, but during the *night shift* we used to talk about how we could run another business alongside donuts. Boys come because they're attracted to girls. He said they first talked about Prerna and how much men would pay for her, then the other girls, then it came to me, Jahanvi. As soon as I was mentioned, they all said, nobody can talk about Jahanvi, she's a very nice girl! With Prerna, even if she quits now, she'll still be talked about. If I hear things here, I'd quit from here. I have problems at home but that doesn't mean I keep working there. I'll eat less for two days but I won't tolerate that."

Whilst acknowledging the ramifications of leaving work – "I'll eat less for two days" – Jahanvi asserted that it is far more important to maintain your dignity at work. She said she would be prepared to quit again if a similar situation developed at her new workplace.

The wilfulness asserted in the narratives of Jahanvi, Sheela, and Prachi about leaving work suggests that with very little power to challenge the conditions of their employment, young women may put up resistance through their resignations. These young women suggest that managers act with a degree of impunity because they think that women (of their class) work out of necessity, that women are good silent workers, and that women's labour has little value. Managers may treat them as 'staff' who are 'beneath' them, may insult them in front of customers, sexually harass them, or make the work environment unpalatable for them in other ways. In such scenarios, women seem to reach a breaking point, whereby they establish control and respect through their resignations. When Sheela finally quit her café job after working there for 18 months, her manager called and requested her to come back. When she did not acquiesce to his request, she got a call from the head office who offered to transfer her to another branch of the café to resolve the conflict with her colleague. For Sheela, who had quit because she felt insulted, this was a brief moment of feeling 'valued' for her work. She accepted the offer but eventually quit to return to studies. Workers' resignations are commonly subsumed in studies of patterns of staff turnover, which is often cited as a reason for lack of unionisation in the precarious service economy (Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011). While these wilful resignations do not indicate collective struggle and probably only have limited impact on workplaces, for these young women, they were meaningful as a form of 'micro-resistance' (Scott, 1985; Ngai, 2005; Ong, 2010). Their movement across various jobs and activities may give the illusion of 'choice' and easy availability of work, but the following section shows that that is not the case. Their refusal of paid work operates within structural constraints; indeed, it is *through* structural constraints that such refusal and resistance emerge.

'I've never kept my salary to myself': Precarity, labour, life

> Chitra: "Only two of us are left to get married. The elder one has gotten engaged, so she'll get married soon. My brother has a one year old son. Eldest sister has one son, he lives with us. *Didi* [elder sister] lives in the village, there aren't good education opportunities there, so she's sent him here. Younger sister has two daughters, she lives at her own place…And then brother…he drinks and all. That's the *problem*, you can't tell everyone…this is the *problem*, so I get annoyed with *job* people when they don't pay…they don't understand…This is why I was

> working for two and a half years. Now I don't know what's happening. Both Chandni and I are roaming around, without any job. Sometimes we get it, sometimes we don't get it…sometimes we get something…"

A few days after her elder sister got engaged, I met Chitra at Select Citywalk mall. Both Chitra and Chandni, who accompanied her, were upset – earlier that day they had travelled to chase payment for a previous ad hoc job that they had done together. They had managed to get Rs.500 (GBP 5) but said that they would have to go again to claim the rest of the payment. Chitra was particularly upset because on account of this running around, she had been unable to attend training for a new temporary job, thus missing out on that opportunity. As we sat outside the mall, basking in the winter sun, Chitra expressed worries about not finding regular work. For most part of my fieldwork, Chitra was in-between jobs – she had previously worked in a call centre and a café as well as done ad hoc calling and promotions work for events. Chitra's father was unemployed due to visual impairment but her mother had been working for many years. When I asked Chitra what she does, she only told me that she works in a bank. I prompted her – "What does she do in the bank?" - to which Chitra reluctantly responded – "labour type work". The 'labour type work' that Chitra refers to indicates low-paid manual labour, such as cleaning, that many of these young women's parents had done. The employment that Chitra had access to is part of the booming services in the country but, as her account demonstrates, it is low-paid, temporary, and insecure – payments need to be chased, incurring travel expenses as well as paucity of time, which hampers the ability to pursue other jobs and other activities.

Chitra's employment was, as for other respondents, deeply embedded in structures of interdependence in her family. While her family could 'get by' if she did not financially contribute (as was the case at the time of this interaction), her income could prevent them from sliding into poverty, especially given the unreliable contribution of her brother who spent at least part of his income on drinking and gambling. Initially reluctant to accept money from the daughter, her family had come to depend on her income. Chitra handed over the salary to her family, only keeping some 'pocket money' for her clothes and food. This was the case with the rest of the respondents too – none of them retained their full salary, most (if not all) of it went towards family expenses (as

I noted in previous chapters). I asked Pranjali, who worked as a financial assistant in an office, if she manages to save anything for herself from her salary –

> "Right now, there are so many expenses, I can't really save. *Mummy* does try, she supports a lot. I give her the salary. After all the expenses, she puts some money in my account. The rest is fixed, this much money has to go here and there. I have my own expenses too, Rs.2000-3000. Thankfully, I don't go to the *parlour*! At least I don't have that expense! My main expense is travelling and some on books, that's it. Everybody is studying, they all need tuition fees. I got a phone recently for the youngest sister, got a telling off at home (laughs). They say, you don't have money, how did you get this. But I can manage it, I'm working, I can pay it off."

The expenses that Pranjali detailed were common among other respondents' families too – young women's incomes contributed towards their own and their siblings' education, supplementary tuitions, as well as loans for phones, laptops, refrigerators, repairs, etc. While these expenses are not 'essential' – that is, their families can survive without these – they play a crucial role in maintaining hold, if only tenuously, over 'middle class' status. Education, in particular, was an important expense that held the promise of 'improved' futures. As discussed in previous chapters, young women's educational qualifications enabled them to enter new service work. They hoped that after graduating they would have better opportunities, although they were also aware that there were no guarantees. Based on their longitudinal research in the small town of Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh, not very far from Delhi, Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery (2004) note the limitations of formal education in overcoming existing caste and class inequalities. They show that although young men from the low caste *Chamar* community had gained education, they were unable to convert their cultural capital into secure employment. Similarly, young women, although able to *enter* service work, were stuck in low-level, semi-skilled, and insecure employment. Nevertheless, with limited access to other forms of capital (as discussed in Chapter 4), young women positioned their employment and education as interdependent.

Further, many respondents described their incomes as playing an important role in addressing the 'problems' that their families had had over the years. They used the English word 'problem' to refer to crises resulting from loss of stable household income.

These 'problems' seemed to emerge through breakdown of male breadwinner norms – Chitra's father could not provide for their family because he was visually impaired, her brother kept his salary to himself, spending on drinking and gambling. Both Chandni's and Prachi's fathers had been unemployed for years. They remembered their mothers struggling during their childhoods and started working in part to help with 'problems' at home. While these young women's mothers may have been propelled into the workforce because of their husbands' unemployment, the inter-generational protraction of such 'problems' in a changing socio-economic scenario complicates the picture of young women's (or daughters') participation in employment. While Pranjali bought a phone for her sister on instalments, Prachi's family had taken out a loan to repair their house. They were 'disappointed' when she left work after disagreement with her manager and some colleagues –

> Prachi: "They were a bit disappointed that I've left work, I can't explain it to them fully what kind of people they are…So I just said I'll find other *jobs*. There are problems, we have to pay back *loans*…"
>
> Me: "What loans?"
>
> Prachi: "We've just had our house re-built. Our family is progressing only now. My sister started working a few years ago."
>
> Me: "What does your father do?"
>
> Prachi: "He used to do a *government job* but not anymore. This was a long time ago."
>
> Me: "So why did he quit it?"
>
> Prachi: "If I sit down to explain our family's *problems*, *seriously*…sometimes I really think about how I've managed to survive and study so much in my family!"

Since Chitra, Chandni, Prachi, and other respondents had experienced vulnerable livelihoods when growing up, they were keen to secure their longer term futures. They contemplated the possibility of 'problems' later in life, particularly the possibility of breakdown of normative gender relations of dependence, as they had witnessed in their own families. Chitra stated –

> "I wanted to have a *career* before too but now it's become even more important. My *BF* [boyfriend] said to me we should both build our careers. In the future, he said what if I can't do anything and something happens to him…"

While Chapter 3 highlights women's desire for employment as a way to disrupt gender norms, this discussion shows that employment for these young women is also "one important dimension of the unequal distribution of conditions required for continued life" (Butler, in Puar, 2012, p. 170).

Although Prachi's family was not pleased about the loss of income when she quit her job, she simply stated – "I'll find other jobs." I hired Prachi as my research assistant in early 2017. She worked with me part-time for a few months but was unable to secure another job until January 2018. Chitra's account also shows that employment is not readily available, with many young women staying unemployed for longer than they had anticipated. However, even when they found employment, young women were sceptical about it because of their prior experiences of having to chase payments for their work, sudden changes to terms and conditions of work without consultation, as well as shutting down of cafés, offices, and call centres. While Chitra's efforts to find a job were, at the time of this interaction, hitting a brick wall, she had, on previous occasions, been successful at finding data entry, sales, and events work. Her last job was with an events company that had initially promised her Rs.12,000 per month (GBP 120) and additional commission for recruiting customers. However, the company soon decided to halve all the employees' salaries due to low sales, and Chitra, unconvinced that they would ever pay her the full promised salary, left the work. Chandni, who had done similar work before, also reported similar experiences with chasing payments –

> Me: "And the job you'd done before, that was for a car company?"
>
> Chandni: "That was a *car company*. They had *events*. Our *job* was to call up *customers*, ask them, '*Sir*, there's an *event* on this *date*, would you like to *attend* it?' If they show interest, we have to give them the address and write *'confirmed'* against their name and send it on in a mail to our senior. That was just for five days. That was Rs.500 [GBP 5] per day, so Rs.2500 [GBP 25] in total. But I still haven't got that money. I don't like asking for money again and again. We were working at a good place, so I didn't force it."

As Fernandes (2000) points out, the conditions of private service work in India characterised by "Processes of retrenchment, increased job insecurity and a structural shift to subcontracted work represent striking points of convergence between the industrial working class and middle class experiences" (p.102) (also see, Gooptu, 2013b). These conditions of work interrupt the imagination and pursuit of stability through participation in the new economy. Indeed, while the work these young women are engaged in would be classified as 'regular/waged work' for survey purposes, their experiences disrupt such classification. After attempting many interviews, and being disheartened, Prachi eventually found a job in a tourism agency office in January 2018. She was, however, cautious and did not accept my congratulations – "Let's see if it works out or not…They're saying they'll give me Rs.14,000 [GBP 140] per month but I'm not sure..."

While these uncertain conditions of work affect both young women and men in the new service economy, women also expressed a sense of 'precarity' in the knowledge that these were short-term *jobs* rather than *careers*. That is, they did not see scope for themselves to progress to a higher occupational level. On one of my 'observation' days in *Cuppa n Cake* where Sheela was employed at the time, I witnessed an area managers' meeting. Dressed in shirts and black trousers, a group of men pulled tables and chairs together to sit in a boardroom format. The café workers – with titles like 'brew master' and 'housekeeper' – were behind the counter dressed in t-shirts and trousers. The gender differentials in the café were stark – all the area managers around the table were men whereas two out of three workers behind the counter were women. I made the observation to Sheela, who shrugged and responded – "That's how it is." She told me that there have been one or two women area managers but it is common (and somewhat accepted) that despite the large number of women employed as waiters/cashiers/baristas in these cafés, it is mostly only men who make it to managerial positions. Sheela was one of the few respondents who lasted relatively long in her job, around 18 months. In that time, she was once awarded 'Employee of the Month' (for which she took home a coffee hamper) and was promoted from 'team member' to 'brew master', this was not accompanied by a significant pay rise. Even though Sheela had been a dedicated worker, she did not see scope for herself at the managerial table. Similarly, Ranjini, who had been working at a fast food chain for a year and a half, was 'promoted' to 'trainee floor manager' or TFM without much of a pay rise

(her in-hand salary increased from Rs.9000 to Rs.10,000 or GBP 90 to GBP 100 per month). It was uncertain when and whether the opportunity to take up a managerial role would arise. In July 2018, over WhatsApp, Ranjini told me that she had lost her job because the café owners decided to shut it down on account of low sales.

In exploring gendered aspects of precarity, the concept 'feminisation of labour' has been extensively used. It is deployed to refer to various phenomena – increasing presence of women in the workforce, the worsening conditions or precariasiation of work done predominantly by women (Standing, 2011; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2014), and adoption of 'feminine' mode of emotional labour in services. In India, although the proportion of women in the workforce is not increasing overall, in the new service economy of Delhi, these young women's experiences point towards concentration of women in low-level semi-skilled jobs, with little avenue to progress to managerial positions (also see, Fernandes, 2006). While disaggregated data is not available, Das *et al.* (2015) note a gender pay gap across both formal and informal sectors in India (according to ILO calculations, the gender wage gap in India in 2011-12 was at 34 per cent, see *India Wage Report: Wage policies for decent work and inclusive growth*, 2018). Although some respondents working in *Cuppa n Cake* mentioned one woman who they had heard had gone on to become a café manager in the South Delhi zone, I unfortunately never managed to find her. The phantom of the female manager also did not necessarily reassure women that they could progress on the career ladder.

Respondents, however, did not completely blame employers for their lack of progression. They suggested that their families and the expectation to get married, have children, and manage a household *also* held them back. In critiquing mainstream discourse on 'precarity' for its neglect of gender, Fantone (2007) argues that –

> "…young Italian women are dealing with uncertainty in the job market, while at the same time being subject to social constraints and a good deal of pressure to get married, have children and devote themselves to other activities necessary to ensure social reproduction." (p.7)

As women caught between "a flexible job market and less flexible societal structures affecting their lives, such as heterosexual marriage, maternity, care-work…" (ibid, p.8), the respondents for this research also noted the precariousness of their lives beyond the

workplace. Meeta, a café worker, expressed concerns about career progression and explained them through the 'personal problems' that working women face –

> Meeta: "…what happens is that girls leave in the middle because of some *problem,* so they don't make it to the top."
>
> Me: "Why do you think that is?"
>
> Meeta: "Because they do it [the work], they learn all the work as well, but then they have *problems* at home, so they quit."
>
> Me: "Like what problems?"
>
> Meeta: "Like if they have to go somewhere, they can't leave the girl alone at home. With me as well, I'm going to have this *problem*, I don't know if I'll get time off. My family has to go to the village for a wedding, my uncle's son, everyone will go. They came here recently and they are pressuring us to come, so everyone will have to go. I'm the *favourite* at home, so they're saying Meeta has to come. Now I have this *tension*, whether sir will give me time off, will I have to quit the job. And I've learnt everything now, so I don't feel like leaving."

Sarita, who had previously worked at *Donut Time* with Jahanvi, quit after a year and a half because of low pay, to study for her exams, and for unstated 'personal problems'. When I met her, she had recently joined *Chai & Chat*, but she did not think she would stay there for very long –

> Me: "Will you continue here?"
>
> Sarita: "I'll continue another 5-6 months. I have to go somewhere, so I'll need time off. If I can get time off, it's fine. If not, then I'll have to quit. It's important to go to the village as well. Mummy has *tension* about *didi's* [elder sister's] marriage. She's been looking for a while but can't find a match, don't know what the plan is…We have to go in May, we've booked it too…"

These 'personal problems' and 'tensions' (see Gooptu and Krishnan, 2017 on the usage of the term 'tension' in India) are distinctly gendered and broadly fall within the category of what Papanek (1979) calls 'status production work' or work done by women to maintain the status of families, such as, training of children, preparation of feasts, religious observances, etc. Papanek (1979) suggests that "In the middle strata,

where social mobility is most possible and most sought after, women are most often subjected to restrictions on behalf of family status and most likely to spend time on status-production work" (p.779). The compulsion to participate in such status production work has an impact on their ability to stay in employment over a longer period of time, limiting their avenues for progression. Further, although young women distance themselves from the position of 'housewives' (as discussed in previous chapters, particularly Chapter 3), they are still compelled to participate in domestic and care work to a certain extent. They are also aware that as unmarried women, they can avoid some of this responsibility, but once they are married, they will have to take on even more domestic and care work. Following Federici's (2006) argument that "women have always had a precarious relation to waged labour" (also see, Precarias a la deriva, 2004; Betti, 2016), it is important to pay attention to the boundaries, or the lack thereof, between paid and unpaid labour for women in conceptualising precarity.

In the interplay of insecurity of work, instability of lives, and inevitable participation in unpaid work, some respondents seemed to operate within gendered networks of labour. That is, decisions around finding and leaving employment were made among women in households. Some young women had 'relieved' their mothers of precarious employment as domestic workers and factory workers by finding 'respectable' semi-skilled service work. Deepti, who worked in a café, told me that her mother is a 'housewife'. But later in the conversation, Deepti explained that her mother had stopped working when she started her café job –

> Me: "What do your parents do?"
>
> Deepti: "Mummy is a housewife. Papa works in a private factory…as *salesman*, I guess. He's in the field. Like there's a company that makes products for children, he has to deliver them to shops and get payment from them…It's in Saket."
>
> […]
>
> Me: "Was your mother never employed?"
>
> Deepti: "She used to be. She left it when I started working. She used to work in a *company* [factory] too as a *checker*. Then she quit. I told her when I'm working, she doesn't need to. Somebody should stay home. My brother is young too, he goes to *school*."

It is interesting that Deepti's assessment of the 'need to work' is limited to women in the family and emerges in conjunction with the need for someone to 'stay at home'. Other young women who had replaced their mothers as the 'employed woman' in the household also confirmed this while asserting their own independence in seeking employment. Prachi's mother took up domestic work after Prachi's father was fired from his job. Her elder sister started looking after the younger siblings and, as a result, had to discontinue her education after class VIII. Once they were all older, her elder sister started part-time work in a boutique, Prachi found work in a café, and her younger sister, Priya, joined a call centre. Both Prachi and Priya, unlike their elder sister, were able to finish class XII and enrol for undergraduate degrees. With increased income coming into the household, Prachi's mother was able to leave domestic work.

This exchange of productive and reproductive labour, common among mothers and daughters, also took place between sisters. When Prachi was unable to immediately find work after quitting from the café, her younger sister, Priya, stepped up to fill in the 'employment gap' and found work in a supermarket in the mall. Similarly, Sheela, who eventually quit her job over an argument with a colleague, decided to return to studies that she had suspended but only after her younger sister was old enough to find a job and substitute her contribution to the family income. The exchange of productive and reproductive labour should, however, not be mistaken as a paid worker being relieved of all reproductive work in the family. It is precisely because of the complex and messy nature of this exchange that I conceptualise it as 'continual'. Interestingly, none of my respondents ever highlighted that they had quit work based on their father's or brother's employment situation (although, as discussed, they referred to fathers' unemployment as family 'problem' that may have propelled them and their mothers into employment). These exchanges, read alongside earlier discussions of women's identification as 'professionals' (not housewives), disrupt the assumption that women are more 'attached' to domestic and care work. Instead they reveal the specificity of women's experiences of precarity. While men's employment may be defined through the compulsion to be 'breadwinners' for their families, women's employment is mediated through their compulsion to reproductive labour. This is, of course, not a particularly new insight (it confirms the historically precarious relation of women to waged work) but the trading of productive and reproductive labour that these young women enter into is interesting for thinking through the wilfulness they display in quitting their jobs.

This section set out a framework to understand young women's resignations from their service jobs. Keen to be 'professionals' in the new economy, young women navigate insecurity of employment, instability of lives, and inevitability of participation in unpaid work. Although discussions of 'precarity' are often limited to paid work and workplaces, the respondents' experiences highlight the connections between and constraints of both *labour* and *life*. While the work they have entered – 'modern' service work in post-liberalisation India – offers 'respectability', it does not deliver on the promises of formality, security, and stability. Further, even as they resist implication into gendered expectations of domesticity, they are compelled to participate in domestic, care, and status-production work. Aware that these obligations will only intensify in the future, young women do not necessarily invest in imagination of 'careers' in this field. Searching for stability, they move from one job to another – horizontally, rather than for better positions or pay – as well as between domestic and employment responsibilities.

'I want to do a job all my life': The future of labouring lives

I met Ranjini on her day off when she was briefly visiting her workplace – *Happy Burgers* – to pick up a cheque. Ranjini's father was at the time working as a driver and her mother worked as a sales assistant in a shopping mall, her younger brothers were still in school. While working full time – on shifts that were usually 10 hours long – Ranjini was also pursuing Bachelor's in Commerce through distance learning. Ranjini told me that she wakes up early every morning before work to practice running, high jump, and long jump to prepare for the 'physical' exam of Delhi police. She also squeezed in housework before she left for work every day. Ranjini was somewhat of an exception among my respondents since she had worked at the same place for the last two years. She was aware that young women often switch jobs; commenting on this trend, she nevertheless told me that her current employment is only a holding place until she gets a 'government job' –

> Me: "Will you continue here?"
>
> Ranjini: "Yes, I will for now but it's not like I want to leave from here and work somewhere else and then leave there and work somewhere else. I'll work here until I find a *government job*. I don't want to keep changing. With changing, your *training* is useless. So I'll see if I get a *government job*…"

While her job life was longer than that of other respondents, Ranjini's desire to land a government job is much more generalisable. The appeal of government jobs for young women was primarily premised on the 'stability' they offer in contrast to their private sector insecure, short-term, precarious jobs. The English term 'government jobs' was used to refer to various kinds of work (and often no specific kind of work at all) but the desire for stability, security, benefits was consistent among the respondents[38]. In India, in 1990-91, the public sector employed 19.06 million people while the private sector employed 7.68 million people. In the decades following economic restructuring of 1990, as the public sector progressively shrunk, public sector employment declined to 17.61 million while private sector (organised/formal) employment increased to 12.06 million by 2011-12 (Reserve Bank of India, 2014). As the public sector continues to shrink, the young workforce faces intense competition to secure government jobs. The non-availability of government employment has inevitably pushed young people into insecure and precarious private sector employment, as is the case for these women, but the desire for government employment remains. Their parents may encourage this desire but it is not mere nostalgia for the easier days gone by. Instead, I argue, it is produced through experiences of precarity. For Ranjini, a government job not only offers stability, but is also a way to attain respect and prestige. In particular, securing a government job would be a way of realising the worth of her education –

> Me: "Why do you want to do a government job?"
>
> Ranjini: "My *mummy* also wants me to do a *government job*. I said '*Mummy*, *government* doesn't have as much *salary* as *private*.' But she says with *government* there's reliability, with *private* you never know what's going to happen next."
>
> Me: "Yes, I guess it's not stable…"

[38] Although there is limited academic research on the desire for government jobs, a series of recent media reports have picked up on the intense (and hopeless) competition for government jobs among young Indians (*Educated by unemployed: Millions of Indians are spending their youth trying to get government jobs*, May 2019, Scroll.in). These reports include comment on the failures of education by highlighting that even those with PhDs and BTech degrees, unable to find employment commensurate with their qualifications, are applying for low-grade government jobs, such as, peons and cleaners (*50,000 Graduates, 3,700 PhD Scholars, Apply for 62 Peon-Messenger Posts in Uttar Pradesh*, August 2018, HuffPost).

Ranjini: "Yes, in my family everyone is in *government job*, all my cousins everyone. One of my sisters is a doctor, she's gone to America, her husband is also a *doctor*, so they went abroad. My brothers are young but other cousins are in Delhi police, UP police. So I want to do *government job* too. I don't want them to say we're all doing *government jobs* and your children even after studying don't have *government jobs*."

These young women are more educated than their parents; this is more widely reflected in the increasing level of education for women in the country. The respondents were all aware of their higher level of education and used the rhetorical question 'Why would I do that when I'm educated?!' to resist manual work, as discussed in Chapter 5. Education, as such, holds promise of social mobility. However, this mobility is elusive in the private service jobs that they manage to secure, which to a large extent explains their desire for government jobs. Ranjini was, at the time of fieldwork, specifically targeting Delhi police and rigorously preparing for the entrance exam[39]. Other respondents were, however, less clear on what kind of a government job they wanted or how to get it. That is, their notion of government job was vague and limited to the understanding that it is a stable and respectable job.

For young women, another point of appeal was the supposed ease and comfort of government jobs, this was contrasted to arduous labour in their current jobs. Meeta, who was working at *Cuppa n Cake*, told me her parents are keen for her to study more and find a government job for this reason –

Me: "Your brothers aren't working?"

Meeta: "No, they're studying, they're in *regular college*, so they want to get *government job*, that's the *best*. I didn't really want to study anymore, so I came straight for the job."

Me: "What have you studied?"

Meeta: "I've done class XII in Arts and I'm doing BA now."

[39] Ranjini ultimately lost her job after the fast food joint she was employed at closed down. She also did not get through the physical exam of Delhi police. When I spoke to her through WhatsApp in July 2018, she told me that she was looking for office work. She also added that she was keeping an eye out for government vacancies in railways and police force (RPF).

Me: “Open? [Distance learning]”

Meeta: “Yes, papa says you should study more, brothers do too. That you should study, fill in *forms* for *government jobs*, don’t do this *job*. It’s not like they tell me not to work but they want me to prepare for *government job*, it will be easy for you. Like when I get tired and go home, they say, you’ve worked so much, don’t do it!”

These notions of ease, comfort, and respectability are both classed and gendered – as women whose employment is driven neither completely by necessity nor completely by aspiration for high-achieving careers, their participation in paid work is constantly subject to interrogation and anxiety, including at times by the young women themselves, as discussed throughout the thesis. Although Meeta said she would like to continue working at the café, she also reflected on how tiring the work was, recalling discussions of injuries in Chapter 5.

Besides government jobs, some respondents indicated an inclination towards teaching. Teaching is traditionally considered a respectable and safe job for women. In the supplementary interviews I conducted with primary school teachers in the neighbourhood of Maidangarhi, some respondents spoke about how they ended up in teaching because it is a safe option for women that families usually approve of. Jahanvi and Chandni both said they would like to get into teaching but were not necessarily working towards it. Sarita, a café worker, who was pursuing a Master’s degree at the time of fieldwork, had also been thinking about switching to teaching but was aware that teaching in private schools is low paid. She was considering pursuing Bachelor’s in Education but had been unable to find a course that she could afford (there are many private institutions and centres offering such professional degrees but the fees is usually Rs.1 lakh or GBP 1000 upwards). She was also conscious that “…it takes time and work to get a government job” and yet her vision of ‘good work’ was government work –

Me: “Yeah, so you want to get into teaching?”

Sarita: “I do but only in *government*, I don’t want to do *teaching* in *private*.”

Me: “Why not?”

> Sarita: "Salary is really low and it's too much hard work. Even if you go far, you get Rs.5000 [GBP 50] *maximum*…In *government*, maybe it's Rs.10,000-12,000 [GBP 100-120] from *starting*…and then it's *permanent*…"

These young women's ideas of 'good work' are then very much shaped by their experiences of work. The 'permanence' of jobs in the public sector, which is continuing to shrink, is appealing in response to the reality of living with day to day uncertainty. In the words of Shipra, a 20 year old café worker (who had previously worked in a call centre) – "[With a government job] you'll be settled, because *private job*, you have it today, you might not have it tomorrow."

As young women, the search for stability was also inextricably linked with decisions around marriage. One of the respondents was engaged, some respondents had boyfriends, and many were leveraging work and studies to delay marriage. While it is common for questions to be asked about young men's employment status before marriage, these young women's varied narratives about negotiations in arranging marriages highlight the changes in attitudes to women's work. For some women, work was a way to delay their marriages (as discussed in Chapter 3); for others, marriage and relationships were tenuously premised on the ability to earn money (as discussed earlier in this chapter); for a few, marriage was an opportunity to leave work. Sarita, who discussed her plans to go into government teaching (quoted above), was one of the very few respondents who expressed preference for leaving work after marriage –

> "I don't want to work after I get married. You get busy with the family. There are in-laws at home, who would take care of them if I go as well? If it's needed, then I'd do it…I don't have much to say about working or not working…You should run a home well. When you're working after marriage, then your mind is diverted. If you can *perfectly* manage both, then it's fine."

Sarita's hope was that she would get married into a family with enough resources so that there is no need for her to work. Yet, when I asked her whether she is working now because of necessity or because she wants to, she replied 'both'. Engaged in precarious short-term employment with low pay and no benefits, it is not difficult to understand why young women may see marriage as the better option for upward mobility. It is also not unusual for women who have children to take a career break, as my supplementary

interviews showed, given that there is no provision for maternity leave in low level private service and sales work.

However, it is interesting that Sarita's view – that she would like to stop working after marriage to focus on her family – was in the minority. Most young women insisted that they would like to continue working after marriage, some even maintained that they would only get married to someone who approves of their participation in paid work. In doing so, young women claimed respect and value through their work. For example, Jahanvi told me that her father was initially against the idea of her – the oldest of three sisters – going to work. But her mother eventually convinced him –

> "…*Mummy* said to *papa*, what if there's a marriage proposal in which the family wants *padhi likhi ladki*, an educated girl, will you ask Jahanvi at *end time* to go earn money then? Then he said ok. I went to the *job*, they started calling me several times a day – have you eaten? Are there girls there? Are there many boys? I told them there are both boys and girls, I'm enjoying myself!"

The argument presented by Jahanvi's mother is interesting in that she equates being a *'padhi likhi ladki'* or an 'educated girl' with being able to earn money as a working woman. Further, she convinces Jahanvi's father that that would help with marriage proposals. Jahanvi, on her part, desires the same qualities as herself in her future husband. She emphasised that while financial security is important, it is not everything. She is instead keen to discern the 'background' and education of the man, hoping that that would imply that he would let her work –

> "With me, it's not about the money, but I've told papa, I want someone who is educated and comes from a good *background.* I don't have a problem if he asks me to make *rotis* [bread] on the *chulha* [traditional stove], I'll do it, but he should be educated. Someone who talks with respect. If I make a mistake, he shouldn't shout at me in the middle of the street, he can say whatever he wants at home. Someone who doesn't insult me in front of ten people. I want good *background*, good money, so I don't face difficulties once I go there. Papa said what do you think…But this is what I want, also someone who lets me work. I want to definitely do a job all my life, no matter how much money he has."

Jahanvi's comments reiterate the significance of gender relations, and particularly attitudes towards women's employment, as indicator of one's 'background' or class. These young women are aware of other women getting trapped in marriages that are constricting and wish to avoid such situations. Ranjini told me that her parents are supportive of her wish to get married to someone who will let her work –

> Me: "…what about working after marriage?"
>
> Ranjini: "I definitely want to do it. *Mummy papa* said in three years it will be my age to get married. They've said they'll tell them that their daughter wants to work, if it's possible, it's fine, if not…There's no forcing. Like my cousins…my aunt's daughter, she was about to get a job with Delhi police but her in-laws didn't let her do it even though her *husband* was in Delhi police. He said I'm enough to do this job, she should look after *mummy papa*. My friend, she got married, she's a bit older, I'm 20, she's 25…She got married and she wants to work but her family is not letting her. Her mother-in-law has said no. She was in *teaching*. She got a *government job* too, but they didn't let her do it. Now when she talks to me, she says, Ranjini, until you find a job, don't get married."

Ranjini lamented these women's missed opportunities and emphasised that even though they had managed to find government jobs, their husbands or in-laws did not allow them to work. Some respondents' narratives indicated that the disapproval for women's work among the groom's family may also be slowly changing. They told me that increasingly it is not only women who insist on educated men from good backgrounds, but men's families are also keen to find a 'working woman' who can add to the family's income and provide insurance against growing precarity. Neha, who was engaged to be married told me –

> Neha: "Yes. They've said you don't have to sit at home, you get nothing from sitting at home."
> Me: "They've said themselves?"
> Neha: "Yes. They said you get nothing from sitting at home. Unless you go outside and do something, you won't get anything. Because in the future that is to come, who knows what will happen with whom, no one knows. In the house, there's your mother-in-law, you're there, you say something, things unnecessarily get out of hand, there's no point to it."

Me: "That's what happens at home…"

Neha: "Yes, that's happens at home. Better than that, go out and do a job, *mummy* [mother-in-law] will also be *tension-free*, you'll also be *tension-free*. And in the future, teaching children and all…it's not necessary that if you've studied *tuition*, your children should study *tuition* too, you can help them. Yeah…"

Given the precarity of their work and their lives, young women are careful about marriage and future partners. Some women's families are supportive of their decision to only marry if they can continue to work. Whether or not this would transpire, particularly as these young women grow older, is more difficult to say. In one of my supplementary interviews, Aradhna, a 30 year old teacher, told me that her family's standards for finding her a groom had gone down from someone who has a 'government job' to someone who has a job as she has been getting older. Getting a sense of young women's futures was not straightforward and I often got vague responses – Prachi remarked more than once that they do not think about the future, they are too embroiled in dealing with the present. However, in expressing dissatisfaction with their current work, they did envision alternatives. Young women's future vision of work is then not only limited to finding security and respectability through 'government jobs' but also by marrying into families that are of 'good background' and do not object to their continued participation in employment. In their desire both for government jobs and good marriages, young women are, I argue, responding to the precarity of their work and their lives. Further, while young women may not see their short-term insecure jobs in the private services sector as careers, they emphasise the general importance of employment in their lives. Their narratives disrupt the notion that women leave work because their primary attachment is to domestic activities. Instead, this section underscores young women's ambivalent attachment to employment, disrupted in complex and intersecting ways by precarious conditions of labour and life.

Conclusion

For young women, as I have argued throughout the thesis, attachment to employment is ambivalent. Although their families have unstable financial situations, they do not define their participation in employment only through necessity. On the contrary, they claim value and respect through their engagement in paid work. Further, they insist on their desire to continue working after marriage and express preference for elusive

'government jobs' in their search for stability in life. While their entry into employment (and particularly private service work) has been explored through idea of aspirations, there is very little research on their exit from paid work. Given the declining trend in female labour force participation rate in India, despite economic growth and expansion of the service sector, it is important to be attentive to women's own narratives about withdrawal (whether intermittent or more permanent) from the labour market. By following them over one and a half years, we start to see the vulnerabilities and consequent ambivalence of seeking distinction through employment. In this chapter, I then specifically attempted to understand why and how young women, whose income is important in their families and who value work beyond necessity, leave work. These young women's narratives about leaving work fill a crucial gap in contemporary literature on youth and (un)employment as well as gender and work. They reveal how women perceive these jobs, what value and meaning employment holds for them, and the dynamics of their exit from paid work.

Gaining a set of generalisable skills – English speaking, computers, customer management – that have become requirements for entry into the service sector in post-liberalisation India, these young women move around different kinds of work in the private service sector. A common trajectory is part-time employment, usually teaching, surveying, or organising in a non-government organisation while in school, moving to call centres after class XII, and then switching between cafés, shopping malls, and offices. Two years was the longest span of time that only one of my respondents spent in one workplace. Changing work, which included short periods of unemployment, was otherwise frequent, with young women staying in the same job for a maximum of a few months. Their reasons for leaving ranged from being denied time off, low pay, and long working hours to sexual harassment and feeling insulted or disrespected at work. In many cases, young women quit their formal sector jobs quite informally – by just not showing up to work rather than through resignation letters.

These resignations can be, as I argue in the chapter, understood through an expanded framework of 'precarity'. Precariousness of work has been widely discussed, with scant attention to specific gendered dynamics of precarity. As women from lower middle class families, they had a heightened sense of the need to secure their 'respectability' at and through work, where they work under the supervision of male managers without much

scope for progression to managerial positions themselves. Further, these young women experience precarity through the compulsion to participate in reproductive labour for their families. Caught between the competing demands of work and family, they put up resistance (Ngai, 2005; Ong, 2010) by trading one for the other. Engaging in an exchange of productive and reproductive labour with other women in the family, they could impulsively resign from their jobs. In some cases, this resulted in managers requesting young women to come back to work (although they were never offered a higher pay). Resulting negotiations with managers afforded women a brief upper-hand regarding their conditions at work. However, any such gains made were short-lived. As we see in the case of Sheela, she briefly returned to work after cajoling from the head office, but quit soon after, deciding to return to studies.

This resistance, in the form of refusal of paid work, should not be seen in terms of convenient choice – it is certainly not the case that employment opportunities are abundant or that these young lower middle class women can easily move between studies and paid work. Some young women I met for interviews were 'in-between' jobs – having impulsively quit their jobs, they had been unable to find another one quickly. Prachi, who I hired as my research assistant (from January to May 2017) after she quit her café job, did not re-enter employment until early 2018. Others, like Deepti, were hesitant to leave without securing another opportunity first. Indeed, these young women only managed to quit when another woman in the family had found or could potentially find employment. The movement in and out of productive and reproductive work is, as such, continual and messy. Besides challenging the gender-neutrality of contemporary scholarship on precarity, my research findings point to the emergence of micro-resistance to precarious work. In the case of young women, this resistance or *'speaking back' to distinction* is highlighted through their resignations. In the following concluding chapter, I draw together young women's ambivalent engagements in employment, which not only highlight their labour as a site for formations and contestations of class and gender, but also evince the investment of emotions in seeking distinction.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion: The Liminality of Distinction

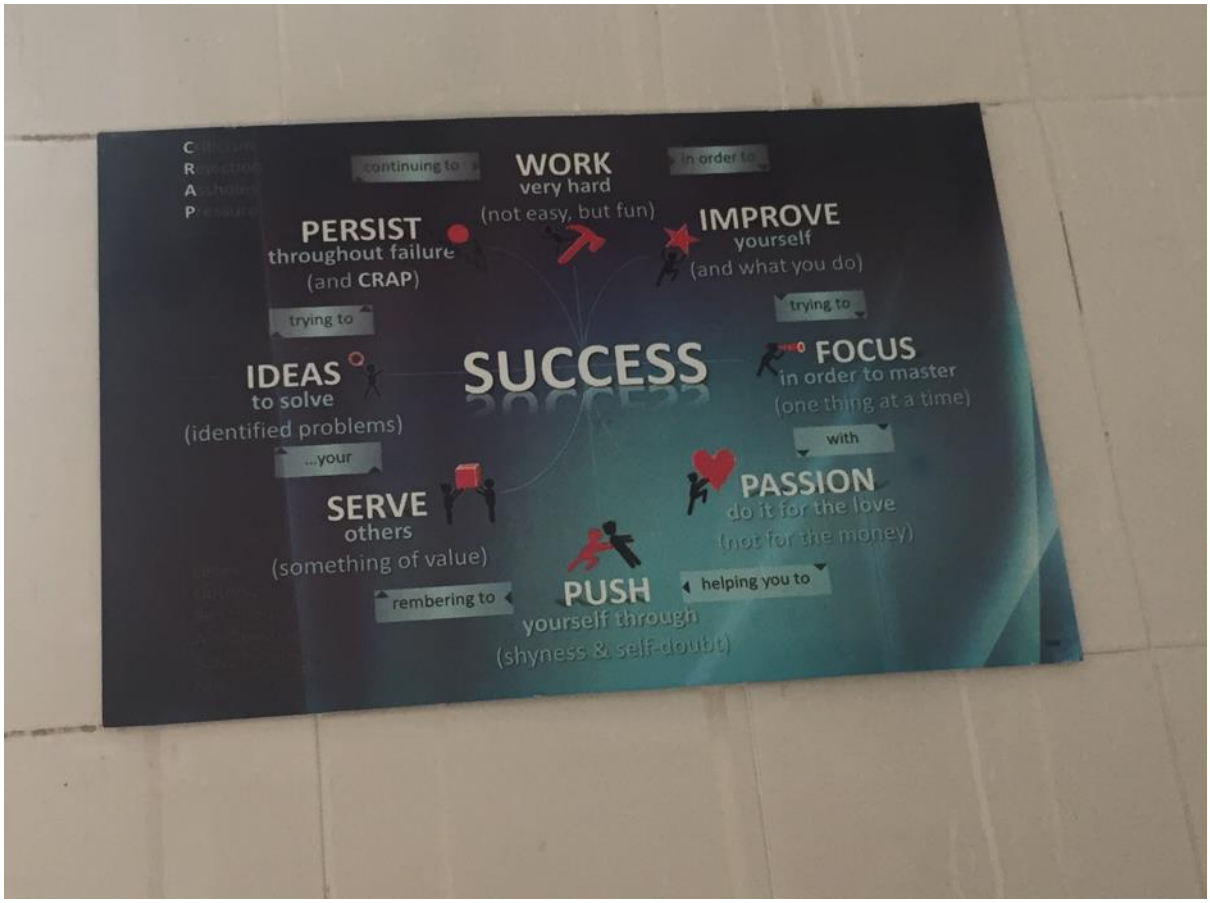

Image 9: Poster at a skills training centre

Summary

This thesis explores young lower middle class women's engagement in the new economy of urban India. Through my respondents' narratives, I have shown how young women posit their service employment as a practice of 'distinction', that is, as a practice of boundary-making. However, I argue that young women's participation in employment as a practice of distinction is ambivalent owing to their liminal position as neither working class nor securely middle class. These discussions disrupt the assumed and mechanical linearity of *seeking 'distinction'*, by demonstrating its complexities, characterised by desire and vulnerability. Accruing *both* pleasures and injuries, young women's experiences in the new economy trouble common conceptions of aspirations and empowerment regarding women's work. Further, they provide an intervention in scholarship on youth and work, which is overdetermined by young men's experiences, by highlighting the gendered differentials in attachments to and the costs of employment in the new economy.

Organised in four substantive chapters, the thesis carves a temporal arc of young women seeking, entering, experiencing, and leaving service work. In presenting young women's employment trajectories, each chapter highlights the mechanisms through which they negotiate becoming 'professionals' in the new economy, across cafés, call centres, malls, and offices. Although these young women lack social, cultural, and economic capital, they have gained higher educational qualifications than their parents. They express dissatisfaction with gender norms by contending that they enter work because otherwise they get 'bored' at home (Chapter 3). They 'work upon' themselves – learning English, computers, customer management – and adapt their comportment to enter the new economy, all the while conscious of the artifice of their 'habitus' (Chapter 4). They navigate workplace, and particularly managerial, dynamics by dressing for the job and refusing manual labour (Chapter 5). However, despite their initial investments into work, young women leave when they feel disrespected or devalued (Chapter 6). The temporal organisation of the chapters imparts a coherence and ease-of-reading to the thesis but it does not suggest a similar linearity in young women's lives. Indeed, to the contrary, the thesis highlights women's movement in and out of employment.

In this concluding chapter, I will pursue a few final points regarding young women's employment in the new economy of urban India. First, I present the contributions of the

thesis. Second, I explore the implications of engaging with and developing Bourdieusian theory for study of young women's emerging subjectivities in a 'non-Western' and rapidly changing context. Next, I consider the limitations of this study, particularly through the material that I was unable either to gather or incorporate into this thesis. On the basis of these, I point towards directions for future research. I then 'update' the ethnography with reflections on some young women's lives since May 2017, when I 'officially' finished fieldwork. This update provides a slightly longer insight into themes relevant to the thesis. The conclusion is followed by an 'afterword' that takes the thesis 'back to the beginning', that is, to the inception of this project.

Contributions

By drawing attention to the continuum of women's labour, with particular focus on their employment in the new economy as a practice of distinction, the thesis makes three substantial contributions.

First, I highlight the *critical role of young women in class formations in post-1990 India*. I garner this insight through ethnographic exploration of young lower middle class women's labouring lives, detracting from the survey-based investigations of low and declining female labour force participation in India. I premise my investigation on the trend towards employment in services among young women in urban India. Further, rather than attempting to measure the New Middle Class, I turn the spotlight towards young women's self-identification (and disidentification), and therefore, towards young women's interaction with the discursive category of the New Middle Class. In doing so, I contribute to scholarship that reveals the gaps between the discursive construction of the New Middle Class as the beneficiary of liberalisation and the lived realities of precarity among the (to borrow from Beteille, 2001) *polymorphous* middle classes in urban India (Fernandes, 2000; Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase, 2009; Dickey, 2012)[40]. In Chapter 1 and Chapter 3, I argue that young women claim cultural and material distance from the "working class culture of the necessary" (Bennett, 2010, p. xxi) on the basis of their employment in new services. While their education and employment in the new economy, in themselves, are symbols of 'open-mindedness' that they associate with

[40] Indeed, the trope of those 'left behind', particularly those already marginalised left behind by structural adjustment programmes is not limited to India and has been discussed more widely (Mains, 2007; Auyero, 2012; Ozoliņa-Fitzgerald, 2016), with even the International Monetary Fund recently publishing a paper on the 'failures of neoliberalism' (Ostry, Loungani and Furceri, 2016).

'high class', their incomes also enable new consumption of transient goods (Osella and Osella, 1999). By focusing on women in class analysis, this thesis shows how rather than just being 'repositories of taste' or 'capital-accumulating objects' (Skeggs, 1997, 2004c; Silva, 2016), young women are playing a central role in the process of seeking distinction through negotiations of their labour, and thus, in the formation of the middle classes in India.

Second, through focus on young women's liminal positioning, I offer a *unique glimpse into the ambivalence of seeking distinction, and thus, into small acts of resistance* (Scott, 1985; Ngai, 2005; Ong, 2010; also see, Agarwala, 2016) that are overlooked in existing literature. Women's participation in the new economy has largely been explored through the concepts of aspirations and empowerment, as is evinced in the predominant image of 'plain Janes' donning jeans to become professionals in modern India (Johri and Menon, 2014). To a certain extent, as Chapter 3 shows, young women buy into the 'game', reproducing neoliberal narratives of productivity and boredom, positioning employment as a way to (at least temporarily) escape gender norms. However, they are not, as Bourdieu tends to suggest, completely "taken in by the game" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 98). Instead, their liminal positioning – as neither working class nor middle class – generates reflexivity. While the working class poor are largely locked out of formal employment in the new economy, I argue such reflexivity would not appear in accounts of the securely middle class, whose belonging in the new economy – premised on English fluency, MBA degrees, and social contacts – is much more straightforward. These young women, on the other hand are conscious of their 'lack' in the new economy and express concerns over 'respectability' in the workplace, as Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 show, respectively. Their engagement in employment as a practice of distinction is, as such, ambivalent – the attachments to and pleasures of seeking distinction, as the thesis shows, are offset by concurrent costs and injuries. The accrual of costs and injuries, as outlined in Chapter 6, may lead to young women's abrupt exit from work to assert their value and respectability. I suggest that their resignations – although not traditional or organised form of protest, such as, strikes, occupation or unionisation – can be read as contestations on a micro-level. This insight not only highlights the emotions of class and the need for nuancing the theory of distinction, but it also offers a window into emerging forms of resistance in the context of precarisation of work, decline of unions, and shrinking of collective struggle.

Third, following women's intermittent and frequent exits from employment, I demonstrate the *importance of understanding labouring lives rather than employment in isolation.* I show that young women contribute through multiple forms of labour – pursuing education and training, participating in domestic and care work, and engaging in employment – towards sustenance of their own and their families' lives. Scully (2016) argues that with increasing precariousness of waged work, households acquire importance as a site for aggregation of incomes and livelihoods. Even so, contemporary scholarship on precarity is largely restricted to various forms of paid work. There is, therefore, a need to modify approaches to the study of work, as I outlined in Chapter 2. Further, throughout the thesis, I show that young women's negotiation of their multiple forms of labour is intertwined with emergence of classed and gendered subjectivities. Through their employment and education, as Chapter 3, Chapter 4, and Chapter 5 show, they reject the subject positions of housewives and domestic workers. Instead, they stylise themselves as urban professional women with 'high class' attitudes and behaviours. By highlighting the interweaving of labour with formations of gender and class, the thesis provides a cogent critique of the employment or occupational approach in class analysis. As such, the thesis illustrates a path for development of class analysis that comprehensively accounts for the 'human condition' of labour (Arendt, 1998).

Bourdieu in urban India

In understanding women's employment as a practice of distinction or boundary-making, that is, women's employment as a site of formations and contestations of class and gender, this thesis draws upon the work of the French sociologist, Bourdieu, particularly his monograph *'Distinction'* (2010 [1984]). Bourdieu himself feared that readers of *'Distinction'* would find it 'very French' (p.xiii). Therefore, in the preface to the book, he suggests comparative coding for the US –

> "One could replace *Les Temps Modernes* by *Partisan Review,* France-Musique by educational television (Channel 13, WQXR, WBGH etc.) and perhaps ultra-leftism by sixties 'camp', while the *New York Review of Books* would (alas) represent an unlikely combination of the weekly *Nouvel Observateur,* the review *Critique* and, especially in its successive enthusiasms, the journal *Tel Quel.*" (p.xiv)

In the UK, numerous scholars have built on Bourdieu's scholarship to understand class culture, practices, and inequalities (Adkins and Skeggs, 2004; Bennett *et al.*, 2009;

Savage *et al.*, 2013; Thatcher *et al.*, 2016, among others). In comparison, Bourdieu's 'very French' analysis has had limited purchase in other parts of the world despite his encouragement that the reader should not let the "sense of distance, even strangeness" prevent them from "reflecting onto his [sic] own society" (2010 [1984], p.xiv). However, in recent years, emerging scholarship on the practices of living class in urban India (Fernandes, 2000; Ganguly-Scrase, 2003; Dickey, 2016), including body work (Talukdar and Linders, 2013), temporal disruption (Jeffrey, 2010a), and aspirations (Dhawan, 2010; Vijayakumar, 2013), has drawn upon Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus. In Chapter 1, I highlight the value I find in deploying Bourdieusian theory and particularly feminist re-appropriations of Bourdieusian theory. Through this thesis, I further push the boundaries and expose the limits of Bourdieusian analysis in urban India.

The thesis demonstrates the validity of the concept of 'capital' through the analysis of resources needed to mediate entry into the new economy. The lack of capital – economic, social, and cultural – is reflected in young women's confinement to the low levels of service work. However, the thesis also underscores the conceptual deficiencies of 'habitus' in its inability to fully capture young women's recognition of the need to alter their selves. Their negotiations in the job market are not constitutive of a 'new' habitus or 'discordant' habitus, which is merely not a good fit with the field. Instead, as I suggest in Chapter 4, their adaptations are best described through the concept of 'plastic habitus' – habitus that is malleable but also at risk of being found out as artificial. Further, the thesis finds scope in focusing on practices of 'distinction', moving away from the 'habitual use of habitus' (Reay, 2004), to describe young women's place and place-making in a rapidly changing context. The thorough engagement with distinction disrupts the linearity assigned to seeking distinction, and as such, to 'aspiring'.

The thesis is further able to pry open the mechanisms of distinction because of its focus on the liminal 'lower middle class' position of young women, which emerges through their uncertain identifications as middle class, 'in the middle', or 'not proper middle class'. I understand this position which is neither here nor there, that is, neither stable working class nor secure middle class, through the concept of 'liminality'. An important concept in anthropology , 'liminality' (Turner, 1967, 1969) has been rarely brought into

dialogue with Bourdieusian analysis. To further develop the notion of fragmentation of habitus, Silva (2016) suggests borrowing from the psychoanalytic notion of 'standing in spaces' and concomitant concepts of interstitiality of fields and liminality. She argues – "An adequate understanding of how habitus fits with contemporary demands for living" – and particularly those related to social change – "has ontological implications disputed beyond sociology" (p.178). In a similar vein, Morrin (2016) and Ingram and Abrahams (2016) find value in stitching together Bourdieu's social theory with the psychoanalytic concepts of 'social haunting' and 'third space', respectively. My research is a unique empirical exploration of such theoretical inter-weaving, with focus on liminality (also see, Ghannam, 2011). Deploying liminality to understand the anxieties of being 'in-between' allows a magnified take on the mechanisms of seeking distinction.

Although there is new and growing scholarship on and critique of Bourdieu in UK sociology, it is largely limited to research in the UK[41]. The extension of Bourdieusian theory in this thesis specifically exposes its limits from feminist and Global South perspectives. Through this critique, I challenge the epistemological divide between the empirical Global South and the theoretical Global North. In doing so, I do not situate India or women in India as an exception to otherwise 'tried and tested' theory, a position that reiterates false universalism of Eurocentric theory. Instead, I intend this extension to be an illustration of the need to revise current sociological accounts of socio-economic change. As Bhambra and Santos (2017) put it – "The impetus is transformative as opposed to additive" (p.6). In small part, this project is then a contribution towards developing the scope for global and connected sociologies (ibid).

Untold stories, unresolved questions

As with any research, there are stories that remain untold and questions that remain unresolved in this thesis, which point towards directions for future research. This study focuses on the experiences of young women in the new service economy of urban India. In its reflections on contemporary change, it tends to neglect the *longue durée* of gender, class, and labour in India. There is rich scholarship on the historical role of women's work – in industry, in services, as housewives – in the formations of class, caste, and nation/nationalism. These studies demonstrate the intersections of patriarchy,

[41] See my review of a recent volume on 'The Development of Bourdieu's Intellectual Heritage in Contemporary UK Sociology' (Islam, 2017).

capitalism, and imperialism in colonial, post-colonial, and modern contexts (see, Banerjee, 1990; Sangari and Vaid, 1990; Rajan, 1993; Sen, 1999; Sarkar, 2001, among others). While the thesis provides an insight into contemporary and emerging subjectivities among young lower middle class women in Delhi – particularly their engagement with modern and neoliberal modes of being as working women – it does not delve into the history of emergence of such subjectivities. It also does not explore the interaction of these work subjectivities with the projects of nationalism and citizenship. The study would be enriched by an extended exploration of the history of the construction of the 'New Indian Woman', particularly in relation to employment as a site of class and gender formations. A brief history of the New Indian Woman can be a compelling entry point for a monograph based on this thesis.

Alongside the need to historicise the themes of gender, class, and labour, I believe there is profound value in developing this project into a longitudinal study, continuing the investment my respondents and I have made in each other's lives. None of the respondents have acquiesced to matrimony in the time I have known them, which is slightly surprising considering that they are now above the average age of marriage. Based on a household survey in urban Delhi in 2006, Sudarshan and Bhattacharya (2008) confirm that "…the decision to work outside home is usually a household decision, i.e., a large majority of working women did not work prior to marriage and a majority of unmarried working women stop working after marriage or after delivery of a child" (p.59). Given varying trends in the impact of marriage on women's workforce participation, it would be fruitful to trace the lives of these young women beyond marriage. While they assert their wish to continue work after marriage, will this be the case? Or will changing conditions of life, for better or worse, lead to their withdrawal from the job market? If it is going to be the latter, what subjectivities will they engage with and how will their practices of distinction change?

The few married women I got to know during my fieldwork and conducted interviews with (as described in Chapter 2) were employed by non-government organisations as community workers and drivers while others worked as teachers. Although I did not carry out an in-depth study with them, I noted some similarities and differences as compared to my ethnographic group. Similar to unmarried women, they rejected the subject position of 'housewife', suggesting that they get bored at home even though they

took on primary responsibility for housework. Their engagement with 'respectability' at work was, however, not necessarily premised on their education. Further, they tended to stay in their jobs (which, it should be noted, were distinct from the jobs young unmarried women were engaged in) for longer durations. Rama, who I met early on in my fieldwork in the neighbourhood of Khirki, is still employed as a community worker at the same non-government organisation. Further, in participating in boundary-making through their labour, mothers reflected on their mothering practices in addition to their employment. The influence of the labour of marriage and motherhood on women's subjectivities needs to be further explored in the context of socio-economic change (see, for example, Dhawan, 2010).

In conducting the ethnography in Dakshinpuri and Khanpur in South Delhi, the religious and caste profiles of my respondents were limited. All the respondents were Hindu and from low to middle caste backgrounds. The caste backgrounds were not necessarily a surprise since scholars have showed significant overlaps between class and caste (Sheth, 1999; Deshpande, 2003). The homogeneity of their religious backgrounds, on the other hand, was largely determined by the neighbourhoods that became my field sites. In the last phase of fieldwork, when I conducted one-off interviews in other neighbourhoods of South Delhi (Sarita Vihar, Maidangarhi, Badarpur), I spoke informally to some Muslim women. In Sarita Vihar, I met Benazir, who works as an *Anganwadi* (child health care centre) helper[42], earning a small income. Benazir had been working at her local Anganwadi for 16-17 years at the time, she told me she joined this work despite protestations from her husband because she had the '*tamanna'* or desire to do a job. Her eldest unmarried daughter, Najma, on the other hand, does not work outside the house. She has studied to class X and completed a training course in beauty parlour work. While she said she would like to find a job, she knows her father will not permit it. So, she has contented herself with doing housework, sewing work, and occasional beauty parlour work, all at home. While Najma was the same age as my respondents – around 19-20 years old – her trajectory seemed different. Indeed, it confirms the literature on Muslim women's tendency towards self-employment and

[42] Anganwadi or child health care centres were set up in 1975 across the country to deliver nutrition, care, and education services to children in their early years. These government-run centres employ 'workers' and 'helpers' – overwhelmingly women – although they are not technically classified as 'employees' but as 'volunteers' and paid stipends rather than salaries (Palriwala and Neetha, 2010).

home-based work (Neetha, 2014; Chambers and Ansari, 2018). Benazir commented on the strict adherence to the practice of '*purdah'* (or veiling/gender segregation) for unmarried girls in her husband's family. It may, therefore, be the case that Najma is able to take up employment *after* marriage. While these untold stories highlight the significance of women's labour (in this case, Najma's labour in the confines of home) in *making* communities, they also point towards mediation of 'distinction' through varied community practices (in this case, through the practice of *purdah*).

The thesis draws attention specifically to the experiences of *young lower middle class women* in Delhi. There is growing literature that explores the experiences of youth on the margins in the context of socio-economic change in India. Ganguly-Scrase (2003) engages with attitudes towards women's work among lower middle class communities in Kolkata. Jeffrey's (2010b, 2010a) ethnographic research explores formations of class and gender through young lower middle class men's experiences of unemployment in Meerut. Dickey's (2016) longitudinal study in Madurai offers insights into the changing circumstances of those on the edges of working class and middle class identifications. While the focus on the loosely defined category 'lower middle class' in these studies provided me a useful reference point, I also noted significant dissimilarities. For example, Ganguly-Scrase (2003) refers to the 'domestic help' hired by her lower middle class respondents (my respondents' families could not afford this, indeed, some of their mothers had been domestic workers themselves); Jeffrey (2010b, 2010a) notes the practice of enrolling in higher education to 'kill time' among his respondents (my respondents were unable to access full-time higher education); and Dickey (2016) mentions the extremely sparse furniture in her respondent's homes (my respondents' homes were, generally speaking, better equipped with refrigerators, televisions, almirahs, etc.) These differences in the way lower middle classness is inhabited point to the need, as Dickey (2012) has suggested, for further ethnographic explorations of class. Further, while I heard from my respondents about their fathers and brothers, I could not fully explore men's positions in the new economy (on cultures of masculinity in Delhi, see Srivastava, 2010). How do young men engage with the liminal position of being neither working class nor securely middle class? What subjectivities do they draw upon in the changing socio-economic context in the metropolis of Delhi? Further explorations of gender relations in seeking class distinctions will enrich this field of study.

Since 2017

Although I officially finished fieldwork in May 2017, having shared teary goodbyes with my respondents, I do not necessarily see that as the point of completion for this research. I undertook two follow-up trips, in December 2017 and July 2018, but more importantly, I have kept in touch with some of my respondents over WhatsApp and Instagram. I have also, since spending an extended period of time with them, become invested in their lives as they seem to have in mine. The thesis would, therefore, feel unfinished without reflection on young women's lives since mid-2017. These reflections are helpful in considering the continuities and discontinuities in the practices discussed in the thesis chapters. They also offer a final opportunity to recapitulate the theoretical thrust of the thesis. I particularly consider the lives of Prachi, Sheela, and Chandni, whose narratives appear at several points in the thesis. Although they worked together briefly in the café that I frequented in early days of fieldwork, their lives have diverged. However, through these diversions, they have remained friends with one another and with me, if our WhatsApp group 'Delhi friends' is anything to go by.

I had employed Prachi, one may recall, as my research assistant after she quit her job in the café. Prachi had requested a 'certificate' to show that she had been employed with me for a few months, I had duly provided this and left my business card with her in case prospective employers needed references. After I left in May 2017, Prachi spent many months looking for jobs. She interviewed at an office where she told me that she had supplied the certificate I had signed but had not revealed that she had previously worked in a café. She said she had really disliked the work in the café, it was not up to her 'standards' (recalling discussions of respectability in Chapter 5), and therefore, she did not see the point of even including it on her résumé. The prospective employer, however, had been suspicious of this 'certificate', interrogating Prachi on how she had managed to meet a PhD student from Cambridge. Uncomfortable with disclosing that we had met at the café, Prachi had simply said that she met me through some acquaintances, which failed to convince the employer. The employer's suspicion, however, Prachi explained, was not an issue of her skipping her full work history. It was more about how she, as a lower middle class woman, had come to be in the company of a clearly upper class woman who studied at Cambridge.

Prachi did not get that job and then went through several more months of job hunt, punctuated by spells of illnesses that she was having difficulties getting diagnosis for. She found a data entry job but stayed in it only briefly, leaving on account of ill health and employer's reluctance to give her time off. At one point, Prachi expressed a sense of exhaustion from having to look for work and was surprised when her younger sister, Priya, managed to secure the job that they had both interviewed for. Prachi's surprise at Priya's success was premised on Priya's non-seriousness regarding studies and work, as opposed to Prachi's *innate* desire to be successful that differentiated her from her family (Chapter 4 discussed this reliance on the *essence* of the self, see Lawler, 1999). Sheela and Chandni consoled Prachi, suggesting that perhaps she was over-qualified for these semi-skilled jobs, with her fluent English speaking, excellent general knowledge, and confident interview skills. In early 2018, Prachi joined a tourism agency office, where she worked for a few months, before leaving again because of ill health. Sheela and Chandni told me, when I met them on one of my trips to Delhi, that the area Prachi lived in (the slum called JJ Camp in Dakshinpuri) was not good, it was rife with illnesses, and moreover, Prachi's family was not able to get her the medical attention she required, highlighting the precarious conditions of her life (as noted in Chapter 6). Prachi, unable to find a job that suits her, is now pursuing a Master's degree through distance learning.

Sheela, after working at the café for around 18 months, quit her job after disagreement with a new colleague. This new colleague, Sheela told me, came from a good family, "*achhe ghar se"*, implying class difference between them. This seemed to give her the license to not treat her colleagues respectfully. Moreover, much to Sheela's chagrin, when they had an argument, the manager did not support Sheela despite her being the 'senior' employee in the café. Sheela was one of the very few respondents who had studied only to class XII, she had not been able to muster enough money to join a distance learning undergraduate course because most of her salary went towards her siblings' education. After she quit her job, she decided to finally enrol for an undergraduate degree. As noted in Chapter 6, her younger sister had started working around this time, which seemed to have enabled Sheela to leave when she felt disrespected at work. Sheela showed me selfies with new friends she had made at college, where she was attending classes once a week.

After a few months of enjoying being a student, Sheela started grumbling about feeling bored at home once again (reiterating the temporal value young women assigned to employment, discussed in Chapter 3). She told me she had helped her younger sister find a good job through an 'uncle' who she had got to know at the café she used to work at. Her sister had, however, taken it lightly and quit after she was not allowed time off to attend a wedding. Although Sheela's sister's insistence on attending the wedding at the cost of the job aligns with discussions of resignations in Chapter 6, Sheela was annoyed that her sister did not understand that when you work somewhere, you cannot always follow your will. The employer offered to reinstate Sheela's sister, but she refused to go back because she felt disrespected. Perhaps because her sister dropped out of work, Sheela decided to seek employment again. She found work in a small office – although she did not completely like it, it was acceptable for the time being. It was during her commute to and from this office that Sheela met with the accident that I discussed in Chapter 5. When the shared-van driver ignored her request to stop the vehicle, Sheela panicked and jumped from the moving van, injuring herself. In the time she took off to recover after the accident, Sheela decided to quit this office job too. She said they were pressurising her to achieve unrealistic sales targets. For three months, she had received monthly salary of Rs.5000 (GBP 50) only because she had been unable to meet these targets. Sheela eventually went back into employment in an office in Okhla, South Delhi, where she continues to be employed as she pursues her undergraduate degree by correspondence.

Chandni, who, as I noted in Chapter 6, changed many jobs during my fieldwork, has been working at an office in Nehru Place for just over a year now. She had taken a break from employment when her mother found work as a live-in nanny. But, similar to Sheela, Chandni too felt that the loss of routine had an adverse impact on her and, therefore, decided to resume her job search. Chandni's retention in office work for over a year may imply that she has managed to find the kind of 'office job' that other respondents had expressed preference for. Besides 'government jobs', young women said office jobs that involve working at a desk, using a computer, and not chasing sales targets, are preferable to café and call centre jobs. This preference, in large measure, seemed to be closely associated to the desire to mitigate the costs of labour (particularly the exhaustion and injuries discussed in Chapter 5). Doing work while sitting down, using computer skills, and earning a stable income, as opposed to standing up in cafés all day,

being co-opted into doing manual/domestic labour, and the threat of salary deductions made 'office jobs' a more favourable prospect for young women negotiating vulnerability and respectability in the job market. While Chandni has had success in the field of employment, she has been doing less well in her studies. Prachi, who cleared all her exams in first attempts, keeps telling Chandni to study more seriously. Chandni, however, says she just cannot focus on books. She did not manage to clear exams in two subjects in her second year of undergraduate degree and is now retaking them, alongside her final year exams.

Chandni's mother continues to work as a live-in nanny, her father is still unemployed, and her brother has finished school and enrolled for BA Programme by correspondence, similar to Chandni. Other than that, her brother just 'roams around', Chandni complained to me. Chandni has been upset with her friend Chitra too. Chitra and Chandni, one may recall, looked for and found jobs as a pair during my fieldwork. However, after hitting several brick walls, Chitra gave up on the job search. Interestingly, it is on the issue of employment that Chandni and Chitra have had a falling out. Chandni blames Chitra's boyfriend for this change in her attitude. Chandni said Chitra has gone 'mad' in love and by the time she realises it, it will be too late. While Chitra, Chandni says, is planning to elope and get married with her boyfriend who is from a different (higher) caste (and, therefore, her family would not agree to this match), she is herself happy being single and meeting men who are single too, without any commitment.

While Prachi, Sheela, and Chandni have, as such, diverged in their employment trajectories, there are a few significant commonalities that emerge. All of them still reiterate the preference to be in employment. Indeed, as Chandni and Chitra's falling out shows, employment stands in for a 'way of life', as a practice that affords *distinction*. As someone who is invested in being a 'professional', Chandni can no longer see eye-to-eye with Chitra who, she says, is going to be "just another housewife" after marriage. Indeed, they continue to shun marriage and domesticity in favour of employment, and in the case of Chandni, even espouse casualness towards relationships. However, the kind of employment they want is neither easily available nor straightforward to secure, as the cases of Prachi and Sheela clearly show. Prachi would like long-term employment in a 'good' job that matches her 'standards' – of education, skills, and innate intelligence – which she has so far been unable to find. Having completed her undergraduate degree

as well as short-term skills courses, Prachi has expressed uncertainty about how to proceed. Similarly, although Sheela's office work might have been less exhausting than her café work, it did not offer her a stable income.

Discussions on unemployment and underemployment in India have gained intensity at the time of writing this thesis. In the light of general elections in the country, journalists have highlighted the surplus of overqualified youth in the job market, pointing out the 'compromises' young job seekers have to make to secure employment[43]. This lack of job opportunities was, for my respondents, compounded by insecurities of life – Prachi's ill health has kept her from being able to invest energy into looking for work (and the lack of resources, in turn, has implied limited access to medical care) while Sheela has intermittently taken up undesirable employment to finance younger siblings' education. In the job market, these young women, as the thesis shows, are marginalised both by virtue of their class and gender. Indeed, very little has changed in their lives since I finished fieldwork. Cognisant of their liminal positioning, they curtail their 'aspirations' according to "the practical anticipation of objective limits" (Bourdieu, 2010 [1984], p.471; quoted in Vijayakumar, 2013, p.779)[44]. Indeed, even though Prachi continues to search for a job that meets her 'standards', her earlier ambition to find an internship in a law firm or a media office has dissipated. Further, although she had earlier emphasised that she would only do a postgraduate degree if she could enrol in a college, she is continuing to pursue studies through distance learning. Chitra seems to have given up altogether on finding work while Sheela's engagement in employment is still only tentative. Only Chandni has gained some semblance of security through her office job.

[43] See, for example, *Work undone: How India fails its young job seekers*, May 2019, Al-Jazeera.

[44] In early 2019, I watched an online show 'Made in Heaven', which gained popularity among Indian (upper middle class) audience shortly after its release and was recommended to me by a friend because it features an ambitious young woman as one of its main characters. As the storyline develops, we get to know Tara Khanna, a wedding planner and wife of a rich industrialist in Delhi, as a woman who is originally from a low-income neighbourhood of Delhi. Through a combination of personality development classes, a variety of service employment, and the determination to transcend her status, Tara Khanna has managed to 'marry up'. She is, however, keen to establish her own career separate from her husband and his family. While Tara's story weaves together important themes of class and gender - impostor syndrome, pain of 'leaving behind' her own family, and indeed habitus tug (Ingram, 2011), most evident in her preference for *chhole bhature* (spicy chickpeas curry, common on the streets of Delhi) even as she coordinates sophisticated wine and canapés events - her success in achieving social mobility seems fantastical. In contrast to Tara's ambitions that lead her from a one-bedroom slum dwelling to a posh multi-storey house complete with a swimming pool, my respondents' narratives present a more 'realistic' account of young women's lives in the new economy of India.

These narratives reiterate that while young women posit their employment as a practice of distinction, that is, as boundary-making and place-making, to the extent of losing friendships over it, this is not without its costs. A longitudinal study of these young women's lives can further reveal the long-term consequences of the injuries they incur in the process of seeking distinction. Further, their continued desire for and efforts to be engaged in stable and secure employment in the competitive new economy of urban India interrogate the assumption of 'socio-cultural factors' in explanations of low female labour force participation rate. Patriarchal control may limit women's mobility, education, and access to employment. However, once young women have managed to negotiate entry into the workforce, their exit is largely owed to precarious conditions of labour and life. It is possible that women fall through the cracks in their movement in and out of work, initially becoming part of statistics on unemployment, and perhaps, eventually becoming incorporated into the often cited statistics on low female labour force participation rate. The thesis findings highlight the need to be attentive to women's accounts in furthering knowledge about socio-economic change as well as in developing policy proposals to enable women's participation in employment in India.

Afterword

In 2012, a young woman, Jyoti, was gang raped in a moving bus in Delhi; she succumbed to her injuries after several days in hospital. The incident galvanised large-scale protests across the country, demanding safer access to public spaces for women and stricter punishments for offenders, making 'women in India' an issue of global debate. This project was initially conceptualised to explore young women's place in the 'unsafe' city. I was curious to understand how young women were, amidst this heightened sense of 'danger', navigating their everyday lives (see Krishnan, 2015). In the course of preliminary research, I was drawn to young women's aspirations, particularly those regarding employment. This was not curiosity for curiosity's sake; my interest in young women and work was informed by the various narratives that emerged as Jyoti became 'India's Daughter' and the violence she was subjected came to be characterised as disruptive of modern India (Raychowdhry, 2013). Jyoti was a physiotherapy student, her father worked as a luggage handler at the airport, her mother worked as a housewife. On the night of the incident, Jyoti had gone to the Select Citywalk mall to watch a movie with her friend. On the way back, they boarded a bus in which they were accosted by six assailants, all young men who lived in slum dwellings in Delhi. Jyoti's untimely and horrific death came to be seen as a blow to the aspirations of 'New India', where young women are able to build better lives through education and employment.

My respondents' profiles were similar to Jyoti's – they were young, they were more educated than their parents, they were seeking and entering work that their parents had not done. In exploring their place and place making in the 'new' urban India, I decided not to lead with questions of violence. I became critical, similar to Mary John's (2019) concerns in a recent essay, about sexual violence (particularly sexual violence perpetrated by a stranger in a public place) becoming a 'touchstone' in the aftermath of Jyoti's gang rape in 2012. This is not a dismissal of issues of violence; on the contrary, such reflection, I believed, was crucial to understand women's negotiations of *various kinds* of violence, marginalisation, and oppression in urban India. Perhaps it is telling of the landscape of the city that during the course of fieldwork, I ended up frequenting the route Jyoti had taken that night in 2012 – from Select Citywalk, towards IIT, Munirka, and Dwarka. Through the rich narratives of young women in this thesis, I hope I have been able to offer a glimpse of everyday violence, everyday resilience, and everyday lives

in the city of Delhi. Towards the tail end of my fieldwork, I met a small group of young school girls, around the ages of 10 to 11, while walking around in the *gullies* of Dakshinpuri. Chatting to them, I asked – what do you want to do when you are older? They giggled; one of them quipped – "I'll do a computer course to get a good job." Another agreed – "*Han, job pe jaya karenge"* ["Yes, we'll go to work together!"] The third one nodded and said – *"Apni life banani hai mujh ko"* or "I have to make my life." The thesis is for the resilient young women who seek to make their lives through their labour despite all odds.

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Appendix I: Sample interview questions

Introduce myself and the study – I am conducting research on young women and work in Delhi, I would like to speak to you about your work and your life more generally. This is more a conversation, rather than an informal interview, and you don't have to answer questions that you don't feel comfortable with. You can also ask me questions as we go along. Do you have any questions for me before we start? Are you happy for this conversation to be recorded? Your responses will be anonymised.

- Tell me about yourself – your family, where do you live, what do you do?
- What do other people in your family (parents/siblings/husband/sister-in-law) do? If your mother worked outside the home, who looked after you when you were younger?
- How long have you and your family lived in Delhi? Do you like Delhi?
- How much have you (your siblings, your parents) studied?
- When did you first start working? What was your first job?
- How did you get into this profession?
- What are your motivations for working?
- How does your family feel about you working? What do you think about that?
- What do you more generally think about women being in work?
- What do you do with the income you earn? What do you/what would you like to spend it on?
- Do you think contributing an income to your family has had an impact on your position in the household?
- Tell me more about your work – what does a typical day look like?
- Do you like your colleagues? Do you have friends outside of work?
- What do you do in your free time? Who do you spend it with and where?
- Would you like to stay in this profession or do something else in the future? Do you want to continue working?

Conclude – Do you want to ask me any questions? Could you please sign this consent form? I need it for my own and my institution's records. Thank you for your time, I hope we can keep in touch and speak again.

Appendix II: Informed consent form

अनुसंधान का शीर्षक: शहरी भारत में महिलाओं के काम का महत्व

छात्रा का नाम: आसिया इस्लाम

मैं कैम्ब्रिज विश्वविद्यालय में पीएचडी की छात्रा हूँ। मैं महिलाओं के रोजगार के महत्व पर एक अध्ययन कर रही हूँ और आपके काम, परिवार और जीवन के बारे में आप से बात करना चाहती हूं। यह बातचीत रिकॉर्ड की जाएगी, इस का उपयोग केवल मेरे अध्ययन के लिए होगा और आपका नाम कहीं पर प्रकट नहीं होगा।

कृपया बॉक्स में टिक करें -

- मैं इस अनुसंधान में भाग लेने के लिए सहमत हूं। ☑
- मैं समझती हूँ कि ये बातचीत रिकॉर्ड की जाएगी। ☑
- मैं समझती हूँ कि मेरी भागीदारी स्वैच्छिक है और मैं किसी भी समय भाग लेने से मना कर सकती हूं। ☑
- मैं समझती हूँ कि मेरे उत्तर केवल शैक्षिक अनुसंधान के लिए इस्तेमाल होंगे और मेरा नाम कहीं प्रकट नहीं होगा। ☑
- मैंने इन निर्देशों को समझ लिया है और मुझे सवाल पूछने के लिए अवसर दिया गया है। ☑

नाम: [redacted]

हस्ताक्षर: [redacted]

दिनांक: 27/12/2016

1

TRANSLATION

Title of Project: Formations of Class and Gender in Urban India: The Significance of Women's Work

Name of Researcher: Asiya Islam

I'm a PhD student at the University of Cambridge. I am conducting a study on the importance of women's employment and would like to speak to you about your work, family and life. This interview may be recorded but will be anonymised for my project.

Please tick box

I confirm that I have understood these instructions and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	☐
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.	☐
I understand that my responses will be anonymised and only used for academic research.	☐
I understand that my interview may be recorded.	☐
I agree to take part in the above project.	☐

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Appendix III: Sample curriculum vitae

CURRICULUM-VITAE

[redacted]

[redacted]
Dakshin Puri Extn.
Dr Ambedkar Nagar
New Delhi - 110062
[redacted]

CAREER OBJECTIVE

- I believe in my background, hard work, self confidence & experience will have to seek and opportunities to prove my potential and growth with the growing organization.

EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION

- 10th Passed C.B.S.E. Board
- 12th Passed C.B.S.E. Board.
- Pursuing B.A 3rd Year from Delhi University.

OTHER QUALIFICATION

- Basic Knowledge of Computer.

WORK EXPERIENCE

- 2 Years Experience as a Credit Card Sales with HDFC Bank at Badarpur.
- 4 Months Experience as a Computer Operator with Marque Gangho at Kishangarh.
- 6 Months Experience as Tele Caller with Country Club at Kalkaji, N.D.

PERSONAL DETAILS

- Father's Name : [redacted]
- Date of Birth : [redacted]1995
- Nationality : Indian
- Marital Status : Unmarried
- Language Known : Hindi & English
- Religion : Hindu

DATE: - ___/___/____

PLACE: -NEW DELHI

[redacted]

SIGNATURE